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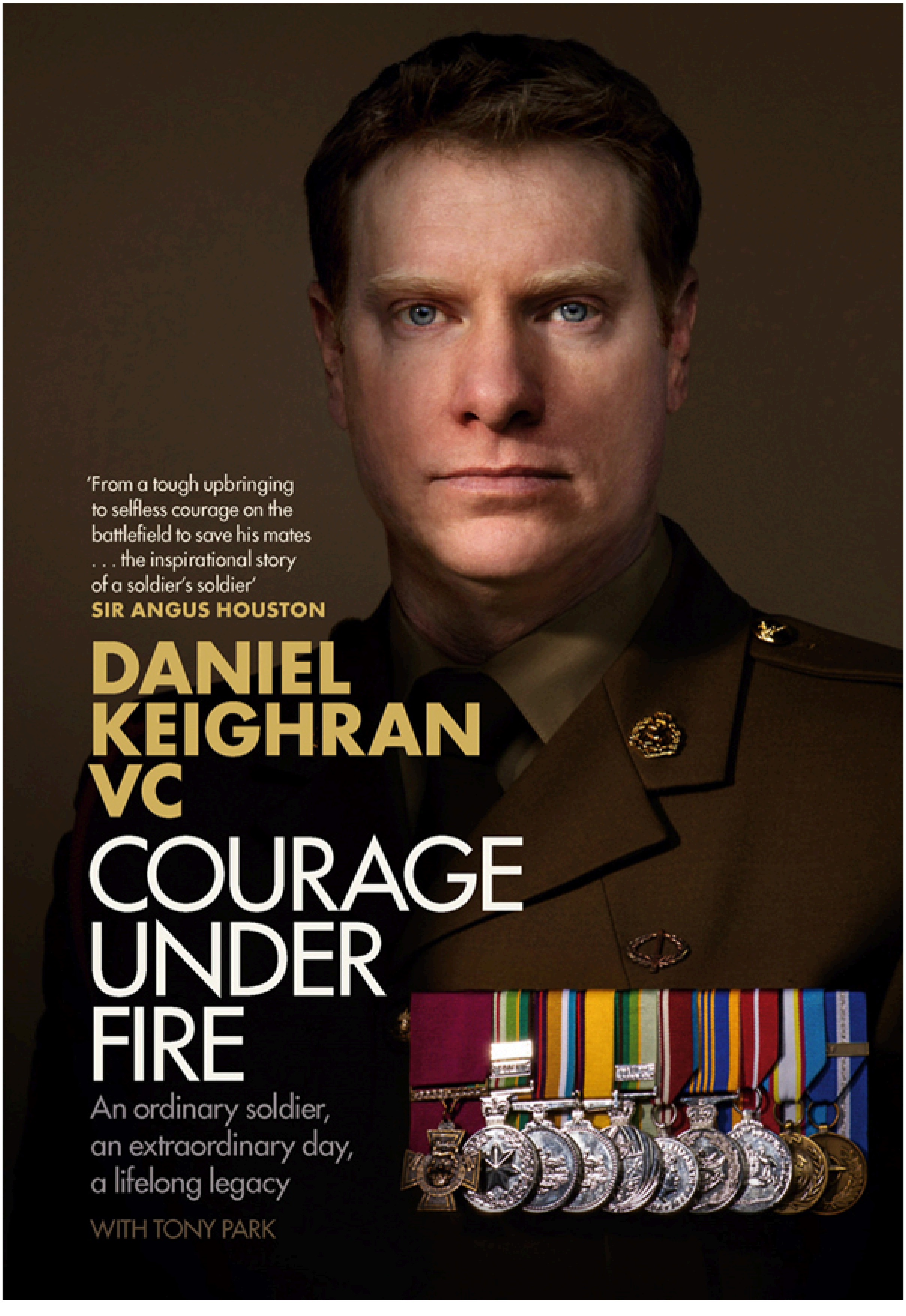
to selfless courage on the
battlefield to save his mates
. . . the inspirational story
of a soldier's soldier'
SIR ANGUS HOUSTON

DANIEL KEIGHRAN VC

COURAGE UNDER FIRE

An ordinary soldier, an extraordinary day, a lifelong legacy

WITH TONY PARK



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About *Courage Under Fire*

On 24 August 2010, in battle in Afghanistan, Corporal Daniel Keighran risked his life in a hail of gunfire to save his fellow soldiers. His actions saw him awarded the Victoria Cross for Australia, making him the 99th Australian to receive our country's highest award for bravery.

Courage Under Fire tells of Daniel's unlikely journey to become one of Australia's most celebrated soldiers. Growing up was tough for Daniel. When he was eleven, his father showed up in his life, for the first time, with a gunshot wound to the stomach. He relocated his son, daughter and their mother 400 kilometres away from their loving grandparents and a coastal home to a shack with a dirt floor in outback Queensland. From then on, Daniel fought to maintain a sense of order and purpose amid the chaos of family violence and criminal activity.

Inspired by his much-loved grandfather, a WWII veteran, Daniel joined the army. There he found the structure that was missing from his teen years. Although just seventeen, Daniel adapted quickly to the demands of life in the military, always willing to learn, always wanting to grow, always seeking to emulate the example of his grandfather.

Courage Under Fire is an outstanding military memoir, packed with tales of multiple tours, accounts of extraordinary camaraderie, and a reflection on the unseen cost of service. Most of all it is a testament to the idea that anything is possible if you know what you stand for.

DANIEL
KEIGHRAN
VC

COURAGE
UNDER
FIRE

WITH TONY PARK

MACMILLAN
Pan Macmillan Australia

For Alan Pyburne,
2/4th Field Regiment, Royal Australian Artillery

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PROLOGUE

Cowboy was the first man I ever saw who'd been shot.

He was my father.

He'd been at a party, somewhere in country Victoria, and the story went that in an attempt to save someone, which was probably bullshit, he'd thrown himself in front of a guy who stormed into the gathering with a rifle. Most likely, it had something to do with illegal drugs. The dude with the gun opened up and Cowboy copped the bullet, in the gut.

After he'd discharged himself from hospital, Cowboy showed up on our doorstep in Maleny, Queensland, where Mum had made us a nice home.

I would learn, in time, that our household was everything he wasn't – small and quaint, neat and tidy, quiet and industrious, sober and safe. He was big and tough, loudly full of outlaw bravado, punching-on and on the grog more often than not.

In fact, Cowboy was the biggest human I'd ever seen. Six-foot-four, massive shoulders, a barrel-chested giant of a man, he almost blocked out the harsh Queensland sunlight as he stood there in our doorway in his blue wife-beater singlet, his stubby shorts and his battered riding boots. Over his singlet was an unbuttoned flannelette shirt, rolled up and stretched over his biceps. He was wincing a bit from where he'd taken a hot lead slug in the gut.

To be fair to him, a weaker man might have died.

'G'day, Knackers,' he said when I answered the door.

I was eleven years old and I had no idea who this stranger was or why he was calling me a funny name.

‘This is your father, Dan,’ Mum said, standing beside me, looking from me to him, something odd, not quite right, in her voice. It was, I think, a mix of love and dread.

As I gazed up at him, reeling inside, my sister, Susan, eyed him off from a position of safety inside the house. She might have remembered him; she was old enough to have cried when he left.

I recall, clearly, when Mum got the phone call, about four weeks before Dad had turned up. That was the first time it really hit me that I had an actual father, not just some long-forgotten, faded pictures on a fridge or in Mum’s room. Cowboy had left my mother, Judy, a few days after I was born. Susan was six at the time.

But the phone had rung that night and when Mum answered it, it was Ian ‘Cowboy’ Keighran’s latest girlfriend on the line.

‘Mrs Keighran, I just want to let you know that Ian’s been shot,’ the distraught young woman said by way of greeting. At least she knew that her boyfriend had a wife.

‘Is he dead?’ Mum replied.

‘No, but he’s in hospital and he’s not real good,’ the girlfriend said, in that way country people have of understating things.

‘Oh.’ Mum hung up the phone. ‘It’s finally happened.’

‘What, Mum?’ I asked.

She looked down at me. ‘Your father’s been shot.’

I’d never given him a second thought, the man with the fair hair in the picture with Mum on her wedding day, and now I was learning he had been shot, like someone in a Western movie. It figured. He was a cowboy and that’s what people called him.

My world was being turned upside down by something that most other kids loved, or took for granted – the presence of a father. Sure, I knew I had a biological father, but I had never asked about him, never worried that he hadn’t been in my life or that I had absolutely no recollection of him.

Even when other kids at school talked about their complete families and I saw their dads sometimes pick them up or drop them off at school, it never occurred to me that I was missing out on anything. My grandfather was my dad, the reason I joined Defence, my mentor, my father figure and he had already begun to instil old-school values in me.

Now all of a sudden, I did have a father, and he had returned – as it turned out, to rob us of the life Mum had worked hard to create for us.

*

After I found out I was going to receive the Victoria Cross for Australia, the Australian Defence Force did a pretty good job of whitewashing my family background.

Under my new ‘legend’ – as spies call their cover story – Ian Cowboy Keighran was a rodeo rider, a roustabout, a Crocodile Dundee, rough around the edges, but community minded with a heart of gold. There was no mention of drugs, other girlfriends, gunshot wounds, a half-brother of mine who was conceived while Cowboy and Judy were living together, or of my mother handing in his guns because she feared for her life.

Like all good legends, it was based on truth. Little grains here and there *did* reflect part of his story. He did organise rodeos, he did bring people together, he could be a romantic figure, but that wasn’t the half of it.

My own life was also airbrushed. My social media accounts were scrubbed clean of the sorts of things soldiers have on them – pictures of drunken parties, crude jokes and general evidence of someone leading a normal life.

Later, after I had received the medal, one of the many media opportunities I said yes to involved me visiting a young offenders prison in Queensland and talking to a group of inmates. They were sullen and withdrawn, perhaps too tough or too scared to open up in front of a television camera and a bloke they had never heard of. The Victoria Cross meant nothing to them; I was just another fly-in fly-out do-gooder. I tried engaging them, but nothing I said was making them open up or giving the TV crew what they wanted – good television.

In desperation, I broke cover.

‘You mightn’t think I know what you’ve been through,’ I said to the group, ‘but my dad broke the law.’

One or two of them looked up from the floor, or away from the clock on the wall.

‘Yeah,’ I continued, ‘he’d abandoned Mum and my sister and me and I only met him when I was eleven and he showed up at our place after he’d been shot.’

The truth freed something up between us. My dad, who if he wasn’t breaking the law was circumventing it, was of more interest to these guys than anything I had done in Afghanistan.

I talked for a while, all of it being filmed, about my childhood and how I could have easily followed the same path as my father, but I had taken a different direction. My story wasn’t just about making one right choice in life, though, it was more than that. It was about a series of decisions, some conscious and some unconscious, to live my life in a particular way. It was not down to me, either, the path that I had taken. There was someone else in this story, someone who the ADF’s airbrushing of my life had all but painted out of my picture like collateral damage or a friendly-fire casualty.

When the interview was over, the young offenders and I shook hands, meaningfully, like men who had shared something, unburdened a little to each other, and maybe all of us were just a little better off for the experience. I like to think so.

‘That was great,’ said the journalist, who I’d had some dealings with in the past and respected.

‘Look,’ I said to the reporter, ‘I know you’ll hate me for this, but can we please not use the bit where I said my dad was a crook and had been shot?’

‘Dan, you know that’s the best bit of the story?’

I nodded. Kerry Stokes, the head of Channel Seven and a wonderful supporter of all the Victoria Cross recipients and Australia’s military heritage in general, had given me the chance to do some presenting for his network, so I had learned through that, and through my own exposure to media interviews, how the game was played.

‘It’s not public knowledge,’ I said, bolstering my case.

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ the reporter said.

But when the story went to air, sure enough, the fact that I had opened up about my father’s dodgy past was the main focus. Cowboy and I rarely spoke, but I heard that when he found out, he was livid. Neither his brother, John, nor his sister, Fay, knew anything about that part of his life, not even that he had been shot in the belly. I learned a good lesson: that nothing is off the record.

The rest of the media didn’t pick up on it, which was lucky, and I was able to go back to the manufactured history that suited everyone better. I was the rough diamond, the backwoods-country-boy-made-good who had met the prime minister, the governor-general and the Queen. From poor, but honest, parents, I had grown into a man with his own pretty wife and a baby on the way.

I was a fairytale.

But it wasn’t the whole story.

So this here is my true story, or as true as I can remember, on the record, and it’s not all about one day in Afghanistan. A life is not lived in or around one day, or at least it should not be, and I refuse to let that one day in my life define me.

Some of my story may read like a dream, some of it like a nightmare, some of it like a comedy. And if there is a hero in it, it’s not me, it is another soldier, who served his country, saw the horrors of another war long ago and helped me work out what I stood for.

ONE

The danger didn't bother me; I loved the river too much.

I liked the feel of the warm wooden boards of the pier under my toes. They were worn smooth, half rotten and almost crumbling on the edges, bleached pale grey by the burning Queensland sun, and smelled of salt and old bait, sunscreen and dead fish.

That river – the Maroochy River, in Maroochydore on the Sunshine Coast, where we lived for a time – is my earliest memory. I'm four years old and standing on the edge of the pier, looking over my toes down at the turquoise waters and yellow sand, silvery scales of fish catching the sun, beckoning me like a lure.

My sister, Susan, aged nine then, had enticed me to the edge, and I had done as she said, hoping to catch a glimpse of the man I loved, the one who cared about me. All I wanted, always, was to be with him, be out on the water with him.

'Go on, Dan, go down to the pier, to the edge, go see if you can see Grandad's boat,' Susan had said, taunting and cajoling me – she delighted in getting me in trouble.

I knew that I shouldn't be there, on the edge of the pier, with a sister who would have laughed if I fell in, but I wanted to see the boat, to get in it, to get out on the water again. Away.

Susan would be fine; she was older and she could swim. Boy, could she swim. Every morning, she was at the public pool, a block away from our house, doing laps. She was good and she loved it. It was her way of escaping; mine was in Grandad's boat.

'She could be in the Olympics, one day, swimming for Australia,' Mum would say.

Susan and I both already had the urge to get out of the house as much as we could. Home was cockroaches, wallpaper curling and hanging limp in the heat, waiting to fall as the humidity and the bugs ate away the glue that was losing the battle to hold on. Mum cleaned – that was one of her three jobs – and I remember the smell of bleach, tripping over buckets and mops, rubber gloves, her on her knees scrubbing. The house was clean, but the roaches still loved it.

‘I’m making progress on it,’ Mum would say as she swept and scoured. But the toilet was permanently stained from years of neglect pre-Mum and the carpet was ripped and the curtains thin. The little rented flat where the pretty single mum and the two little kids lived was the dingiest on the street. No amount of cleaning would change that.

‘I’m making progress’ was my mum’s favourite saying. The soundtrack and moving pictures of my childhood: her working, always, trying to stay positive; cleaning, typing, stacking supermarket shelves; always trying, never stopping; wiping the sweat from her brow in the stifling summer; always ‘making progress’, yet never really getting anywhere.

I had no idea who my father really was or what he was like. Cowboy had shot through when I was a baby. The man I thought of as my father, spiritually if not biologically, was Mum’s dad, and he was out there, somewhere, on the river, in his boat.

Like thousands of other Australians from further south, my grandfather, Alan Pyburne, and my grandmother, Norma, had migrated north from Melbourne when Alan retired from his job.

Grandad was a man of contrasts: he had spent his working life employed by a company that distributed Johnnie Walker whisky and other spirits, but didn’t touch a drop of alcohol until he retired, and even then it was only an occasional glass of cask wine. He had served in the army, in the Royal Australian Artillery, during World War II and had seen firsthand the horrors of battle, and while he was proud of his service, for most of his life he didn’t march on Anzac Day and he never talked about his experiences.

Before Grandad retired, he, Grandma Norma, Mum and her brothers John and Anthony had lived in the Melbourne suburb of Sandringham, near the beach on Port Phillip Bay. Even though this was about as far away from the bush as you could get and still be in the state of Victoria, from an early age Mum was besotted with horses.

‘I don’t know why,’ she told me later. ‘It wasn’t because of movies or anything like that. I always wanted a pony and when I turned ten, Mum and Dad gave me a pair of toy six-shooter revolvers and a pair of jodhpurs and I was hooked. I got a puppy instead of a pony, but I knew what I wanted – a horse.’

Judy had a couple of uncles in the Shepparton area, one with a dairy and the other an orchard. She spent her school holidays at one or the other, surrounded by cows and pigs and draught horses, which she adored. ‘That’s where I wanted to be,’ she said.

Alan and Norma worked hard. The company he worked for kept his job open for him while he was away at the war and he went back to it after he was demobbed. Both took on several jobs to feed their family, and they taught their two children the value of commitment and labour.

Mum had not been an impressionable young teenage girl when she met my father; she was twenty-seven. She had been working in Melbourne, doing office work since she left school at sixteen, but whenever she could, she’d escape the confines of the big smoke and head out to Yarra Glen, a small country town forty kilometres out of Melbourne where a friend of hers who owned a couple of horses lived. Mum eventually saved enough money to buy her first horse, Tiki.

Cowboy Keighran was a drover. He was doing a bit of odd work as he passed through Yarra Glen and was cutting hay in a field when Mum first laid eyes on him. His brilliant blue eyes, sandy hair, his easy way with the horses and his larrikin charm captured her, just as skilfully as Grandad could strike with his rod and catch a jewfish.

Even though it was the 1970s, Cowboy lived a life on the land that hadn’t changed much from the pioneer days, moving cattle through the country to market and slaughter. He worked the long paddock, driving cattle down public roads, so the beasts could graze on the little grass bordering the tarmac that had managed to survive the ever-present drought. He'd camp at night, and cook breakfast over an open fire.

He spent his working days in the saddle, smelling of horse and sweat and leather. At night he'd get drunk in country pubs and get into fights, always up to something, working some angle, doing some dodgy deal on the edge of the law. He was also a rodeo rider, the archetypal hard-drinking, hard-riding, gun-toting cowboy.

'He's got twelve lives, not nine,' I remember Mum saying once. 'He's rolled cars when he was drunk and walked away without a scratch, and once he had a bull fall on him and smash up his foot and ankle when he was riding in a rodeo, but he's still alive and kicking.'

While Mum had gone straight from school into employment she hated working in an office and longed to escape, full time. Cowboy, with his wild, semi-nomadic lifestyle, offered her a way out, and freedom.

Cowboy and my mum were chalk and cheese, right and wrong, good and bad. Opposites. No wonder she fell for him, hard.

Once she'd met Cowboy, who literally lived life in the saddle, it was inevitable that she'd leave the city for the country, the office for the land.

He'd already been married once. Cowboy would come and go through Yarra Glen and on one of those occasions Judy took off with him, forsaking her safe, secure office job for a drover's life. It must have been a dream come true for her: the two of them riding the long paddock, moving mobs of cattle.

They slept in an old van or under the stars at night and by day they rode the endless tracks between Victoria and New South Wales. It was romantic for the city girl, but she admits she was naive. When she became pregnant and gave birth to Susan, she knew she had to slow down and stop living the droving life for a while. They settled in Berrigan, in the Riverina region of New South Wales, for a few years where Susan learned to ride at an early age, but Cowboy would head off, still, for long periods, not ready to forsake his life in the saddle.

Judy moved back to Victoria and rented a little house at Launching Place, just sixty kilometres east of Melbourne, but out of town enough to be able to keep a couple of horses of her own and hopefully keep her man, who would certainly never fit in a city. Mum found work picking fruit, but Cowboy kept on droving, coming and going. When Judy realised she was expecting a second child, me, she asked him to settle down.

For the nomadic man of the land, it was too big an ask. He left one day and, apart from showing up after my birth for a few days, he never came back.

*

High and dry with a daughter to look after and me on the way, Judy couldn't manage on her own in rural Victoria. Still pregnant, she packed up Susan, her two dogs, and her meagre belongings, organised transport for one of her horses and moved to Queensland, where her parents were enjoying a well-earned retirement.

In the few idyllic years Judy had been droving and picking fruit, the workforce had taken some great leaps forward. Computers had made their way into offices and for young women who had learned to keep accounts in ledgers and take shorthand in notebooks and not kept their skills up, it was hard to find work. Judy stayed with her parents until I was born, in Nambour General Hospital in June 1983.

In the folklore of a broken family, a big flood in 1983 caused the Maroochy River to swell and become impassable. Cowboy had been out droving somewhere, but had travelled to Queensland to try to be there for my birth. Though he was warned not to cross the river, he tried, but failed, and didn't make it in time for my arrival. With my father, I don't know where truth ends and the lies begin – the two are blurred. In any case, he only stuck around for a few days after my birth and then he was gone.

As soon as she could, Judy found work, not behind a desk, but cleaning – the only other thing she was good at. Judy saved enough for a bond and was able to move her two little kids out of her parents' place and into a home unit in a run-down block on the edge of the Maroochy River.

She had been abandoned, was working for a pittance, and she had two children to raise, but she would not give up or let herself get down.

For me, still not at school, life was one long riverside holiday.

Mum had turned her back for five minutes, probably cleaning the oven, when Susan led me down to the river. On the far side were the mangroves, where Grandad and I would get out and trudge through the mud in search of yabbies for bait. In the middle of the river was an island, accessible by a bridge. I wanted to go there now.

It's my earliest memory, being somewhere risky, somewhere I shouldn't have been, putting myself out there, on the edge. It wasn't scary, it was exciting, and even though I knew it was naughty, that it was dangerous and didn't make sense, I curled my little toes over the edge of the wooden decking. I wanted to leap out, into the river, and if I did, I knew Grandad would fish me out and put me in his boat.

'DANIEL ALAN KEIGHRAN!'

When your mum uses your middle name, you know you're in the shit.

*

The block that our flat with the peeling wallpaper and the scurrying cockroaches was in was sold for demolition, so we had to move in with Grandma and Grandad again for a while.

While it was crowded, living with her folks and not having to pay rent gave Judy the chance to start saving up the deposit for a house of our own – for her, Susan and me as a family. I started kindergarten in Maroochydore and Susan was able to carry on with her swimming, thanks to Grandad, who paid her fees.

On a weekend trip to the hinterland Mum popped into a real estate agent in the little town of Maleny. A saleswoman talked her into buying the perfect home for us, right next door to the local school and swimming pool. Mum was working like crazy to save money – she cleaned homes and businesses, did some office work, and had a third job picking strawberries in her spare time. She was able to scrape together enough for the deposit on the house – no mean feat for a single mother of two. It seemed that at last she was, in fact, making progress.

Maleny sits high in the green hills about forty kilometres inland from the Sunshine Coast. Away from the beaches and tourist resorts, it was affordable enough back then for Mum to get a toehold on the property ladder, but still close enough for her parents to give her a break from us kids or look after us when she needed them to. There are rich pastures for fat cattle and horses, and macadamia trees cling to the steeply contoured paddocks. Like on the coastline stretching below in the distance, it's hot in summer, but in the winter, thanks to its altitude, it's pleasingly chilly, cold enough for a wood fire.

The house was on the main road, just on the edge of town on the Maroochydore side. It was small, but it was ours. It was made of timber, with weatherboards on the outside, a tin roof and a little chimney popping out the top. It looked like the type of stylised house a little kid would draw. It was a Queenslander, with the living areas raised up off the ground to allow ventilation underneath and louvered windows to catch a breeze on a hot night, or to let the wind howl safely through the house from one side to another in a big storm, rather than blowing it over. It had wooden floors and a sunroom out the front. Our bedrooms were tiny, but it was big enough for the three of us.

The block was stepped down from the road, and there was enough land out the back, just, for Mum to temporarily keep her horse, Tiki, and Boo the dog. We had chooks, and one of my jobs was to collect the eggs each morning. There was a creek out the back for me to explore, trees to climb, and Maleny Public School and a twenty-five-metre pool were right next door, so my sister could keep up her swimming.

It was less than an hour's drive from our place to Grandad's and even though I was getting older, the thing I still looked forward to most was getting out on the river with my grandfather in his boat.

Grandad and Grandma had an old swing set in their backyard and Mum took it with her when we moved to our own house. It was the kind of playground equipment that would give modern-day parents nightmares. If you pushed yourself really hard – or your sister gave you a good shove – you would get so high in the sky that the back legs would jump off the ground – they weren't anchored in any way – and the whole thing would feel like it was about to take off. It was a thrill, but the swings and the tree-climbing gave way to more serious pursuits as I got older, particularly fishing. We'd stopped using the old sandpit at Grandad and Grandma's house by then, so Grandad turned it into a compost heap – it made a perfect worm farm for bait.

As I got older, Mum trusted me enough to use an axe to cut wood for the stove. By the time I was eight or nine, I was responsible for chopping small bits of timber into kindling and pieces big enough to feed into the pot-belly stove which Mum cooked and boiled the kettle on. I guess things were so tight that she didn't want to waste money on the electricity, or maybe she couldn't afford it.

The grass grew thick and fast, a rich, soft green blanket to play on and one of my other chores was to mow it. I'd pull on the chord of the old petrol mower and feel the vibration through my hands and arms as I set off, the first shove being the hardest through the dense covering. There was a big old macadamia tree in the back of the yard that was always dropping nuts and I knew as I pushed the mower toward it that I was going to get hit in the shins by the hard little balls and shredded shells. It was one of those things; the job needed to be done and if my mum could pack and type and clean and chase flies around the house with her fly swatter constantly in her spare time, I could take a few stings to the legs.

Mum just kept on working her three jobs, day and night. As well as cleaning and stacking supermarket shelves, she had landed a day job as a receptionist to a chiropractor.

'Why do you work so hard, Mum?' I asked her one day as she smeared some fluorescent zinc sunscreen on my nose and plonked a stupid-looking floppy hat on my head. With my fair skin and red hair, it was just as well she looked after me.

'It's not just me. Lots of people have more than one job,' she said. 'Your grandad was the same. He'd come home from his job selling booze during the day, and he’d say hi and goodnight to us kids and then he’d go off to another job. He had to work several jobs to keep food on the table.’

Every school holiday and any other chance I had, I would get Mum to take me down out of the hills to Maroochydore, so I could go fishing with Grandad.

I remember one occasion in particular, when Susan was at swimming training – Grandad was still helping out with the fees for coaching – and Mum and I headed for the coast for the day. When we were ready to go, we went downstairs to where Mum kept her pride and joy (other than her horse): a blue Datsun 120Y sedan. I still remember the smell of sun-warmed vinyl and a hint of petrol off the carburettor. We hit the road, relaxed and happy, chatting along the way.

‘Was Grandad in the army, Mum?’ I had seen a picture of him in uniform, but when I’d asked him about it, he had changed the subject.

‘Yes, Dan, a long time ago. He was in the war, in New Guinea and the desert, but he doesn’t like to talk about it, so don’t bother him, okay?’

‘Okay, Mum.’

I had no desire, consciously or unconsciously, to antagonise my grandfather. We never fought and there was never any awkwardness between us. Mum was tired a lot of the time, and she had to ask Susan not to be ‘difficult’ more and more often. But nothing was ever difficult with Grandad and me, and I felt very lucky to have him in my life.

Mum put the radio on and I wished every day could be like this, a school holiday day, with a trip to the river and a long sunny day on Grandad’s boat.

Grandad had always taken me out in his tinnie, which I loved, but from the time I’d turned six or seven, he’d started teaching me, seriously, how to fish.

Maleny was okay, but I missed the smells of the river and the breeze off the water. I got out of the car and ran to Grandad. He gave me a hug and grabbed his fishing gear as he said hello to Mum and gave her a quick kiss. We both wanted to get out on the river as soon as possible. I jumped in the little boat.

The tinnie was on a dolly attached to a winch and Grandad cranked the handle until the boat rolled down from the backyard and into the water of the canal that ran behind my grandparents' house. I waved goodbye to Mum and jumped in, as Grandad unclipped the cable, got in and pulled the starter cord. The outboard spluttered to life. He revved the throttle and the engine buzzed as we pulled away from the bank, out into the canal that led to the river.

Freedom.

'Can I steer, Grandad?'

''Course you can, Danny.'

As I'd become older and had more time on the boat, I'd been progressively allowed to touch more and more stuff on the boat. Grandad wasn't reckless; he was a good, patient teacher.

'Watch her, Danny.' I didn't like anyone calling me Danny, but Grandad could call me whatever he wanted. To Susan and Mum, I was Dan, or Daniel if I was in trouble. 'Don't swing the rudder too much, nice and gentle.'

The breeze eased the sun's sting and cut through the humidity and Grandad started getting the fishing tackle ready as I concentrated on navigating a straight line through the water.

We headed down the canal and Grandad took over as we entered the river, where we were more likely to encounter other boats and where the breeze sometimes whipped up the surface. He steered us toward a favourite fishing spot of ours, by the bridge.

Grandad dropped the anchor and, once he was satisfied it was holding fast, he cut the engine. Peace reigned around us and the sun glittered on the water. A pelican carried out a slow orbit above, watching our progress expectantly. I saw the silver flash of a fish dart under the tinnie.

Paradise.

I started going through his tackle box, eager to catch a fish.

'Let me show you again, Danny,' he said, before I could stuff it up. I reckoned I knew how to tie a few knots by now, but I let him show me all the same. 'Patience.'

His hands were wrinkly, brown and spotted from the sun, but when he placed them on mine, guiding me through the mechanics of setting up my fishing rod, they felt dry and smooth. It seemed he could do just about anything.

‘Good work,’ he said to me, and I felt my chest swell with pride.

We settled onto the aluminium benches. Grandad would occasionally lean over and show me things, like letting out a little more line or easing off the drag on the reel, rather than barking orders at me. He’d tell me how to do something, show me, then give me a crack at doing it by myself. If I needed help, his big hands were there to guide me.

He was always teaching me.

‘Mum said you used to work lots of jobs, like her,’ I said, as I began the fiddly work of making a loop in the end of the line on which to thread a hook.

‘That’s right, Danny. Work hard in life and good things will happen.’

‘Mum works hard,’ I replied.

He nodded. ‘Yes, and good things have started to happen to her.’

We sat there in silence for a while, as fishermen do, going about our business. He baited his hook with a worm and kept an eye on me as I did the same. I managed to do it without sticking myself and he gave a little grunt of satisfaction. He watched as I cast out into the river, then it was his turn.

Again, we sat in silence, and I knew that there was absolutely no other place in the world that I would rather be. I glanced over at Grandad from under the wide brim of my floppy old hat. He was looking at me.

‘You need to find out who you are as a person, Danny, what you represent, what you stand for.’

I had no idea what Grandad was talking about, but I nodded.

‘Your mum’s a good person and she works hard for you and Susan. She knows who she is now.’

We used up our worms and Grandad helped me pull in the anchor. We motored up the river again, in search of something more tasty to entice the fish onto our hooks. It was good to feel the breeze once more. I trailed my hand in the water, enjoying the way the cool drops seemed to run up my forearm.

Grandad nosed the tinnie into the edge of a mudflat and we got out. He and I – mostly he – dragged the boat up a bit more, and then he took a yabby pump out of the water sloshing in the bottom of the tinnie.

‘This is hard work, but it pays off.’ He showed me how to push the open end of the pump into the mud with my foot and then draw the handle out, like pumping air into a bicycle tyre, but in reverse. When he extracted the pump from the mud and pushed the handle down again, a long sausage of a gelatinous black goo spewed out in a more or less perfect cylinder shape.

I’d seen him use it before and I got down on my hands and knees and started breaking up the slimy tube. My small fingers were good for the work and as I squeezed, black ooze covering my hands, I felt the hard, wriggling little form of a yabby.

‘Got one!’ I dropped the yabby into a plastic bucket.

‘Good work, Danny.’

His words made me proud and his smile made me feel even better. Grandad stuck the pump in the mud again, shot out another sausage and I crawled over to it and started fossicking for yabbies. It was hot under the sun and we laughed and chatted as he turned the mudflat into a pock-marked lunar surface.

I was covered in mud by the time we had a third of a bucket for bait.

‘That’s enough, Danny. You have to leave some for the next fella. You’d better rinse off or I’ll be in trouble from your mum.’

‘Can I have a go, Grandad? Just one?’

He stood up straight, towering over me. ‘Alright, Danny, just one.’

I picked up the pump and jammed the nozzle into the mud. It was harder than it looked, even when I put my foot on it, like trying to push the blade of a shovel into hard, rocky ground. Grandad showed me how to use my body weight and get the end down. Pulling on the lever was almost as difficult, and I fell on my bum. He gave a good-natured laugh, but I got up and tried again and this time I managed to pull the handle all the way out, extract the pump and then fire out a healthy dose of sludge.

‘You’re getting stronger, Danny. Growing up.’

He was right about me being a mess and I waded into the warm waters of the river, clothes and all, to rinse myself off. A movement caught my eye.

‘Stingray!’ I chased it through the shallows, the long tail, mercifully, just out of reach as the ray powered away easily with me in hot pursuit.

When I was rinsed clean, Grandad walked across the mud to the shore and found us a couple of flat rocks. We chucked them, wrists flicking, to see who could get the most bounces off the surface from the skimming rocks. When we were done, I ran back for more ammunition and we carried on until I was dry enough to get back in the boat.

He asked me about school and, as we sometimes did, we talked about what I might do when I was older. At the time I didn’t really have any idea – adulthood seemed a long way off. I was happy to just fish with Grandad forever.

‘You need to find out who you are as a person, Danny,’ he said to me again, ‘what you represent, what you stand for.’

Grandad said those words to me a few times over the years, the need for me to understand who I was as a person, what I represented. I thought about what he had said, trying to work out what he meant. He never told me what *he* thought I should do or think, that wasn’t his style.

All I knew back then was that I was Mum’s son, Susan’s brother and Grandad was my dad in all but name. It was enough for me just to be out on the water with him. I was happy. Sometimes we caught fish – occasionally enough for a meal – and other times we’d stop and knock a few oysters off the rocks. They were the happiest times of my youth.

*

While Maleny was an ideal place for two kids to grow up, Mum was a stranger who had moved to a small community. These days, it’s a popular tourist destination and a place where people from the coast can escape the humidity on a weekend drive. Today, it has trendy cafes and health food stores, bookshops and restaurants, but when Susan and I were young it was just a cliquey little country town with a service station and few basic shops. Judy was an attractive young single mum, so it's probably not surprising that the local matrons weren't exactly rushing to invite her over for barbecues and dinners.

Horses and hard work paved her way to acceptance. She had up to five cleaning jobs at a time and got to know people that way. Down the hill from us, up Bald Knob Road, was a big property owned by Cynthia and Nev 'Changi' Anning.

'What's Changi mean, Mum?' I asked as we drove to the Anning property. Nev and his wife were as mad about horses as my mum was, and wealthy by Maleny standards. Mum had come to know Nev by joining the Paint Horse Association; he was also a fan of the breed, with its distinctive white and dark colouring. Mum had agisted Tiki on the Annings' property and when her beloved horse passed away she bought a paint gelding named Jewell from them.

Mrs Anning took Mum under her wing and introduced her to Western riding – trotting around in circles, riding in between barrels, through obstacles, shutting gates from the saddle and a bit of cattle work. In return for their kindness Mum did some cleaning up around the place for the Annings.

'Changi was a Japanese prisoner of war camp, in Singapore, Dan, and Mr Anning was there. You should be very respectful to him because he served his country well and those boys had a hard time in the camps.'

It was all a bit hard to understand as a primary school kid. While my grandad didn't ever want to talk about his time in the army or the war, and we weren't allowed to ask him, Mr Anning would occasionally come out with some interesting stories that seemed funny to a child.

'We used to eat cockroaches to survive,' Changi Anning piped up one day when he saw me inspecting a beetle I had caught in the grass.

'Really? Bugs?' I was incredulous.

'Yes. They're high in protein.'

I didn't know what that meant, but I figured that a person would have to be pretty desperate, and tough, to eat bugs.

‘We bush kids fared better than the city kids in Changi,’ he added, as if eating insects was something that someone from the country would find quite acceptable. ‘We could survive a bit better.’

Although I lived in a small country town, my life was in essence the same as if I had grown up in Maroochydore, where Grandma and Grandad lived, or even in a city suburb – although I did have the benefit of a creek to swim in, a horse in the backyard, and being able to walk seventy metres to school through the back hedge without my mum having to worry about traffic or stranger danger. But that wasn’t what Changi was talking about – the kind of country life he was referring to, the kind that would be a true test of my resilience, I was yet to experience.

Mr Anning, as it turned out, was around for one of my early brushes with death and danger.

Changi Anning had several horses and, in return for the kindness he had shown Mum, she and Susan and I would give the Annings a hand mucking out their stables.

‘You’re very good with horses, Dan,’ Mum said to me as she was using a pitchfork to clean out Mr Anning’s stables one day. ‘It’s because you’re a quiet little boy. The horses like that, rather than kids who run around screaming all the time.’

I shrugged. I knew Mum was crazy about horses and although they were now a part of my life and I had started to learn to ride, I would never share her passion. While I was happy to help her as best as I could in the stables, I would rather have been fishing or playing – especially as I was wearing my new Superman outfit. In fact, back when I was five or six there was something I wanted to try out and Changi Anning’s stables were the perfect place to put my plan into action.

‘You can go and play if you like. I’ll finish up here. I’m making progress.’

Relieved, I climbed the ladder up into the hayloft, where I sometimes liked to play or just hang out and watch Mum doing her Western riding on Jewel.

It was a long way up, or at least it seemed like it when I was small. I made my way through the hay to the opening at the front, one floor up, where the bales were hoisted in and kicked out. Standing on the edge, I looked down and experienced that same sensation I remembered from when I was little and had wandered down to the pier at Maroochydore. I knew I shouldn’t be there, but I couldn’t help it. It wasn’t my sister who had encouraged me this time, it was my own curiosity.

If Superman could fly, then why couldn’t I? I had the outfit, right?

I can feel it now, decades later, still – the rush as I stepped out of the hayloft on that sunny Queensland morning, my tummy lurching and the ground rushing up to meet me.

Mum, inside the stables below me, saw a flash of blue fall past the open door and heard a sickening thud outside.

Dazed and winded, I remember Mum running to me.

‘Dan!’ She dropped to her knees and ran her hands over me, checking for broken bones and gave a sigh of relief mixed with exasperation when she realised I was more or less okay. ‘What on earth were you thinking?’

I had no answer. Just the biggest smile plastered all over my face. I had just learned, for the first time in my life, what it was like to step into the abyss, and survive.

TWO

Cowboy hadn’t been riding alone that day he showed up on our doorstep. Like straight out of a Western, he had a sidekick, Robert, with him.

‘Robert held a train up one time, Knackers,’ Dad said to me. ‘He stood in the middle of the track and pulled a gun on the driver, made him stop. Isn’t that right, Robert?’

Robert had just nodded.

I guess I was supposed to be impressed. I looked back to the giant, Cowboy, and blinked up at him. He was fair, like me, but his hair was turning to grey. I could sort of see where I got my red hair and complexion from.

Instead of thundering up to the little lady’s homestead on horses, Keighran and Co had ridden up in a big old blue and white van with dual tyres on the back. It could have been an old Australia Post or courier vehicle, with a fibreglass cab and a hole in the exhaust that made it sound like a tank starting up when Dad revved it.

Cowboy introduced Robert to his estranged wife, Judy.

‘Do you have a microwave?’ Robert asked her.

Mum was taken aback. ‘Why?’

Robert held up a plastic bag of freshly picked, green marijuana buds.

‘I need to dry these out.’

Mum let this Cowboy stranger and his sidekick set up camp in our backyard, in the beat-up old van they’d arrived in: she clearly did not want them sleeping inside the house. I didn’t feel anything for him, but he was a curiosity, like an old horse my mum had taken in to care for.

I would spy on him from inside the house.

He moved slowly as he got out of the van in the morning, starting a stretch that finished prematurely in a wince. His gunshot wound was still healing; at least that was interesting – I wondered what it was like to be shot.

‘You can make yourself useful and cut down that tree in the back,’ my mum said to him from the back door as she dried her hands from washing the dishes. ‘The roots are buggering up the pipes.’

He nodded and smiled at her. I looked up at her and despite her officious tone, she was smiling. He looked to me and pulled a face.

I walked outside into the heat and followed him, at a distance, while he found an axe. He hefted it, inspecting the blade by running a thumb along its edge. He grinned at me as he took the first long-armed swing at the tree. He grimaced, but the blade hacked into the bark with a pleasing *thunk*. His next stroke sent a wedge of tree trunk flying like shrapnel and he grinned as I ducked.

He was strong. Whatever sort of man he was, there was no doubting that his was a body that was used to hard work. And he was tough. He kept chopping away until the tree gave a satisfying creak and began to topple.

‘Stand back, Knackers.’

I backed away and we both watched, hands on hips, mouths slowly falling agape in unison as the tree fell square onto Mum’s chook shed.

Terrified chickens, squawking as they ran or flew from the shattered remains of the shed, scattered in every direction. My father started to laugh, but Mum was fuming.

‘What have you done?’ she shrieked, as she ran down the steps out of the house.

I had to admit, it was a little funny.

She glared at him and wagged her finger. ‘You’re going to fix that.’

I shadowed him for the rest of the day, acting as his dog’s body, carrying the pliers, hammer, other tools and the chicken wire he needed to repair his handiwork.

I sat and watched him as he sweated and strained through the hot Queensland afternoon, rebuilding the chook shed. The chooks had a new home, but they were so traumatised they stopped laying after that day.

As well as his partner in crime, Robert – who'd been holed up in the van all day and missed the whole chook shed fiasco – Dad brought dogs with him. They seemed to materialise as if from nowhere, a gang of kelpies, blue heelers and a Jack Russell named, unsurprisingly, Jack. The tenacious little dog took a shine to me, and followed me around the yard as I, in turn, tailed Ian.

'I want a place of our own, love,' I overheard him tell Mum one evening, a couple of months after he arrived at our place as he sat on the back step, drinking beer from the neck of a brown longneck bottle of XXXX lager. He'd started using the term of endearment around her and she no longer frowned at him over folded arms when he did.

'I don't know,' she said. 'The kids and I have got a nice life here. We like it.'

'I'm talking about land,' he said. 'Room for horses.'

I saw Mum's eye stray involuntarily to the vacant block where she had kept her horse until she had moved it to the Anning's place where it had more room to graze. He knew the magic word, how to push her buttons. 'Where?'

'Lowmead.'

'Where's that?' she asked.

'About four hours drive north from here, inland from Agnes Waters and Seventeen Seventy.'

'The bush.'

'Yeah. God's own country.'

'More like the devil's in this heat, away from the coast.'

'You'll love it. We can make a home there.' He was smooth; I had to give him that.

'How much land?' Mum had worked hard for the little home we had, but I'm sure she wanted more, for herself as well as us.

'Forty acres.'

'Jeez.'

He had her on the hook and she was wriggling. I knew from Grandad that you had to pick just the right moment to strike, to pull on the line with a short, sharp tug when you wanted to hook your fish good and proper. She folded her arms and pursed her lips.

‘Room for plenty of horses, and a round yard where you can do your Western stuff,’ he continued.

‘We’ll see,’ she said, but I knew he’d landed her. It was clear she had never really got over Ian and now she was prepared to uproot herself and our lives to follow his dream. Cowboy was already becoming a nuisance in Maleny – his dogs were barking all the time and the neighbours were starting to complain. I wasn’t sure if all this talk of moving was serious or not, but my father, Robert and the dogs all cleared out.

If we moved I would be like a fish out of water, snatched from where I’d been paddling contentedly with my sister and my friends. There would be no river up there, and no fishing. No Grandad. My sister lived for her morning work-out, doing laps in the pool and competing. What would she think of all this, I wondered.

And what about my friends? I was in Year Five, an age when you think your friends will be with you for life; they were my world. There was Liam, Michael, Garth and Keith . . . we saw each other nearly every day. What would I do without them?

*

‘We’re moving,’ Mum finally said, about a month later, ‘to Lowmead.’

My sister rolled her eyes and left the kitchen to seek refuge in her bedroom. She didn’t know it, and neither did I, but soon we wouldn’t even have bedrooms. Dad had convinced Mum to leave the house, the home she had made for us in Maleny, to move to the bush. It hadn’t taken him long.

‘It’ll be good for you,’ Mum said to Susan and me, ‘especially you, Dan, all boys need a father figure.’

I had one of those already, my Grandad, but it seemed he didn’t count. Mum was letting this stranger ruin our lives. She sold the little house she had worked so hard to buy and with the money she made they bought the bush property at Lowmead. Cowboy hadn't even put his own money into this harebrained scheme he had planted in Mum's head.

Dad moved up before us so that my sister and I could finish off the school year. For a while, it was back to our old life, the usual friends, swimming in the morning, fishing with Grandad and parties.

Mum used to put on great birthday parties. We didn't have much money, but she always went to a lot of effort. She would make a cake and decorate the place, and all the neighbourhood kids would come.

In the dead of summer, once school had finished, it was time to leave. We packed the last of our things and headed north, Grandad driving. Lowmead was nearly 400 kilometres away. Bundaberg was the nearest big town and even that was an hour's drive, on the coast. At the time it was the longest car trip I'd been on in my life and it seemed to go on forever.

We came to the town, such as it was. A pub, a phone booth, a post box, a small community hall and a primary school. Basically, nothing. A few cattle grazed on the sprawling flood plain behind the pub and school. There wasn't a human being in sight.

'Your mum told me there are only thirty kids in the entire school,' Grandad said, trying to sound cheery. 'That'll be fun, won't it?'

There were more kids than that in my class in Maleny.

Grandad followed the directions Dad had given him. We drove further on, into the hills, along John Clifford Way, which at the time was not even sealed. There was nothing but walls of bush on either side of us, towering gum and ironbark trees, no sign of habitation. It was wild, eerie, maybe a bit exciting. When you're a kid, sometimes things seem like an adventure. I looked at my sister, with her arms folded across her chest and a scowl on her face. Sometimes, when you're a kid, everything's a drama.

We came to a crudely handwritten sign on a tree that said 'Pyburne' – Grandad's surname – 'turn here'.

Grandad turned and slowed down as we bounced off the dirt road and onto a rough track that was nothing more than a narrow gap that been carved through the trees by a tractor dragging a back blade. The underside of Grandad's car skidded and scraped on rocks and tree roots. We were getting further and further away from civilisation – and life as I knew it. Grandad gripped the steering wheel and changed up and down through the gears as he negotiated the uneven, rocky land.

Through the unrolled car window, I heard dogs barking. Grandad pulled up in a small clearing that had been hacked out of the undergrowth. I could see Dad's pack of mongrel canines, five on them tied to a dog-run line strung between two ironbark trees, carrying on at the arrival of strangers. Us.

Grandad and I got out and looked around us. Dad's old blue van was parked next to a lean-to made of rough-hewn gum poles lashed together with rope-tied Cobb & Co hitches. There were a few sheets of rusty, dented corrugated iron for walls and a blue plastic tarp had been strung up where the metal had run out for the roof. The whole thing couldn't have been bigger than about four square metres. I wondered if this structure was a kind of bush kennel for the dogs.

'Here she is,' Cowboy said with a grand wave toward this pile of junk, 'home sweet home.'

We were going to live *here*? The whole set-up looked like it would fall over in a strong wind. I couldn't believe it. My sister looked away, her face contorted in silent fury.

I walked over to take a closer look. I had seen cubby houses that were more substantial than this scrap heap. The tin looked like it had been salvaged from a tip, and I later learned that was exactly where it had come from. Dad had clearly gone out of his way to spend nothing on our new home, not even on the most basic building materials.

I poked around inside.

For furniture, there were benches made from logs split with a chainsaw. I ran a finger along the pale wooden heart of the tree and picked up a splinter for my troubles. There was nothing on the floor inside, just bare earth.

'We're in the middle of nowhere,' my sister said, inconsolable.

A man walked down the track toward us and the shack. He was skinny, with lank hair pulled back in a ponytail and a face covered with stubble. He looked like he'd just woken up.

'This is Ian Kelly, he lives around here,' Dad said. 'He's a descendent of Ned Kelly, the bushranger.'

Mum said hello to Ian. Susan sulked; she was leaving behind her school, her swimming and her friends. To look at her, you would have thought her world had ended. In some ways, it had.

Robert, the train robber and marijuana cooker, was also hanging around, though he looked very different to the last time I'd seen him – he was sporting a massive half-healed scar across his forehead and one side of his face where a chainsaw had kicked back and hit him while he was helping Cowboy build the lean-to. Dad told Mum that Robert would be helping out as a labourer on the property.

Grandad put a hand on my shoulder and I looked up at him. 'You'll be alright, Danny.' If my grandfather disapproved of Cowboy coming back into my mother's life, or enticing us up to Lowmead, he never shared his feelings with me. I never heard him bad-mouth anyone – he was not that sort of person.

At Cowboy's urging, we all got back in Grandad's car and followed my father as he walked on ahead of us along a track that all but disappeared as the terrain become steeper. He led us to the top of a hill. As we got out, a soft breeze cut through the summer heat.

Cowboy knew how to play my mum, because about the only thing he'd managed to do so far was to cut down enough trees to form a round yard, fenced in by hand-cut timber. There were already some horses corralled there and Mum went straight over to them.

*

I woke up with the dawn and scratched a mosquito bite on my arm. The hard, bare earth under my sleeping bag had given me a sore hip and the chirping of cicadas had kept me up late.

This was worse than camping. At least if you were out in the bush on a holiday, you'd have a tent with a floor and mosquito mesh on the doors. We were living in the dirt. I could smell wood smoke and the fat from last night's lamb chops wafting from the cooking fire, which was just outside from where I'd been sleeping. Next to me was what passed for the kitchen, a gas bottle with a cooker plate and a plastic tub full of dirty dishes from dinner. There was no floor, no carpet, no windows, no doors, no electricity – none of the 'luxuries' of a normal house like the one Mum had bought and made our home.

It was cool now, so I wriggled out and did some more exploring. I wasn't sure where Mum was sleeping. She seemed to have been keeping her distance from Dad. In the afternoon, after we'd arrived, she took me and Susan aside, to the shade of a big gum tree.

'I'm doing this for you two, you know?'

'Mum . . .' my sister began.

'Shush,' Mum said to Susan. 'He's your dad and you need to get a chance to get to know him. It won't be easy out here, in the bush, but we're going to try and make a go of it, to make a proper home for all of us.'

'We *have* a home, and you made us leave it.' Susan stormed off. She'd been quiet all through dinner.

I crept outside, alone in the cool morning air, the smell of the gum leaves strong in my nose and magpies singing from the trees around me and did a wee on the grass. I wondered what my friends were doing right now – possibly using a flushing toilet, I thought, and getting water from an actual tap.

I took a tin bucket to the old corrugated iron water tank that stood next to the shack. I let water run into the bucket and looked into it. There were little bugs wriggling on the slightly murky surface. This was to be our source of water for everything – cleaning ourselves, washing clothes and dishes, even drinking, and it was alive with larvae and god knew what else. Yep, worse than camping.

The tank had been filled with drums of water that Cowboy had pumped from Baffle Creek about ten kilometres away, hence the insect life and colour of the water.

The full bucket was heavy, the wire handle digging into the soft pink skin of my palms. My arm was stretched straight and started to hurt. If nothing else, I'd be getting a good work-out living this life and doing my daily chores.

I tipped the water into an old metal paint drum that sat next to the open cooking fire. I gathered some twigs and leaves and put them on the still-warm embers and then knelt down and blew on them. When the kindling smoked, then caught, I heaped on some larger twigs, and then some firewood Dad had already split. Soon a nice little blaze was warming the drum and the water.

I went to the shower enclosure, made from a two-dollar blue plastic tarpaulin, the kind of cheap throwaway thing you buy at a service station. Tied to a peg driven into the ground was some blue and white braided rope that had the logo for 'Telstra', the phone company, woven into it. I untied the stolen cordage and lowered the green hessian camping shower. I went back to the fire and tentatively dipped a finger into the drum; the water was hot enough, so I scooped it out again with the bucket, took it to the shower, filled it and hoisted it. Pulling on the rope, it felt like every little thing I did in life, every action I had taken for granted – like getting water by turning on a tap – now involved some physical effort. My skinny arms, already aching from fetching the water, strained as I heaved the bucket up and over the pulley suspended from a tree branch.

When the shower was high enough and tied off to the peg I stripped off and reached up, on my tiptoes, to partially unscrew the brass shower rose. The water trickled, then flowed faster as I unscrewed. The hot water felt good on my cold skin, but as soon as I was wet all over, I screwed the rose shut again, so as not to waste water. The momentary pleasure I'd felt from being warm was soon replaced with the chill of the morning air. I grabbed a bar of soap from the ground, gritty with encrusted dirt, and lathered myself from head to toe as quickly as I could. With slippery fingers, I started the water flowing again and then luxuriated in the rinsing flow of the hot water. All too soon, it ended, and, shivering, I dried myself.

The cool morning surrendered to the sun’s onslaught. The reality of this new adventure was everywhere to be seen, heard, smelled and felt, with nothing between us and the elements but a sheet of plastic and some rusted tin. The shack would leak in the rain and cook us like chickens in an oven on hot nights.

Mum was washing dishes in the plastic tub. I went over to her. ‘What are we doing here, Mum?’

She wiped her hands and brushed a damp strand of hair from her eyes. ‘Your dad wants to make this place into a horse stud farm. He knows what he’s doing, he’s been working with horses all his life.’

I brushed a fly from my face, a gesture that was becoming second nature already as there were so many of the bloody things around. I sat down on a tree stump and pulled a few bone-dry stalks of grass from the parched ground. ‘Tell me more about him, Mum.’

Mum started drying up and looked away, like she was remembering something. ‘He was a bit of a black sheep, growing up, apparently. He didn’t fit in with his family and left when he was pretty young. He disappeared from their lives for twenty years.’

He’d left us when I was a baby, I knew that much, but I let Mum talk.

‘He was a drover when I met him; came into town with his pay, all cashed up, and he was a real smooth-talker.’ I didn’t really know what Mum meant by that, but she was talking about him and it was all news to me. ‘He sure did love horses. He’s into rodeos as well.’

That sounded interesting.

‘He’s a horse breaker too,’ she went on, ‘been doing it all his life and he’s very well talented at it.’

Her words drifted off and she said something about hearts.

‘What was that?’

‘Nothing. Get along and play, Dan. And put some shoes on.’

I got up and went exploring again. I was missing Grandad – when we lived in Maleny he was only thirty minutes drive from us, but now he was hours away. However, it seemed that every day in this place there would be a new adventure to be had, or chores to be done. I disobeyed Mum’s order about shoes. Everyone pretty much seemed to do as they pleased around the shack and the property, and I'd already taken to getting around barefoot. I found if you didn't think about the rocks and sticks and prickles, then after a while they didn't hurt. When I ran my fingers over the skin of my feet, I found it was becoming rougher and tougher by the day.

*

The toilet was a long drop, and it stank.

In Mum's house, we'd had flushing toilets and hot and cold running water. There was none of that in the camp where we lived now. I scooped some water out of the rusty tank with a plastic bucket and washed my hands.

I was thirsty so I went to my corner of the lean-to and got out the old tea strainer I had found. Kids like to collect little treasures, but mine were more survival tools. I tipped some water from the bucket into my tin mug then used the tea strainer to fish out the wrigglers – mosquito larvae and other bugs and bits of crap – so I could have a drink.

It was early, before the heat.

'You can go out with your dad, Dan,' Mum said.

Dad, wearing a singlet, scratched under his arm and coughed. 'Yeah. It'll do you some good. Build some fucking muscles.'

Mum raised her eyebrows. 'Ian.'

He shrugged. She would complain about him and his language sometimes, but he never paid attention to her and she was always smiling at him.

'Come on.' He was going to work on the fences, before the fast-rising sun and the promise of an esky full of beers made work impossible. 'Start early, finish early.'

I picked up his old toolbox and followed him, pleased with the progress my hardy bare feet were making. I switched the load from hand to hand, like I did with the water bucket, to work on both my arms. Across my skinny shoulders was a coil of fencing wire.

He snickered. ‘You’re loaded down like a black cunt.’

I knew his language was bad and Mum had told me not to say bad things about people based on their race or colour, or things such as disabilities. Cowboy didn’t seem to have these filters.

‘How the fuck are you?’ he said to Robert, who was still camping on our property. So far, Dad and his odd assortment of friends and helpers and wasters and drinking mates had cleared some of the land and started fencing it. He had put a dam in by himself, using a bulldozer to block a steep gully, and we now had a couple of cows. Dad had properly fenced and surfaced the round yard up on top of the hill, where he said he wanted to eventually build a house for us. He’d also built another yard with a shotgun chute entering from the side, where he would break in horses.

‘Alright,’ Robert said.

‘Come on then, you lazy fucker, let’s get this job done. Keep up, Knackers.’

I frowned. Fencing was hard work, especially as I was the bearer of the tools and the wire, and sometime labourer. I still wasn’t in high school, but I was expected to do my share of the work around the place, as well as fetching water for the house, and for dad’s plants.

In the bush up the creek line that fed the dam was Cowboy’s own personal plantation. It was my job to make sure that his rows of carefully tended green plants were well watered.

After I’d filled the water tank at the shack, I’d fetch more bucketloads to take to the plants and carefully water and nurture them. They were important to Dad, and he called them his secret crop. He’d tap the side of his nose and give me a wink. ‘No need to tell Mum or any of your mates that your dad likes growing bloody plants, hey Knackers?’

‘Okay, Dad.’ I couldn’t work out why it was such a secret.

We carried on with the fencing and I worked up a sweat and added to the callouses on my hands, caused by cutting lengths of wire and using the pliers to fix the stuff to the poles. It was the closest I came to Dad teaching me something, but it wasn’t fun or philosophical or educational, like it was when I went fishing with Grandad.

It was just fucking hard work.

Work suited Cowboy. When he set his mind to a chore, Dad would go at it hammer and tongs, the sweat staining his blue singlet, his muscles rippling, his fair skin turning red in the heat of the day. He'd come home smelling of dust and hard work and Mum would give him a smile and throw him a towel, or get a longneck of XXXX lager out of the esky and knock off the top for him. If he could have been like that all the time, a bloke who worked hard and at the end of the day came home to a wife who loved him and kids who wanted to be like him, then life might have been different.

But it wasn't.

He spat in the dust by the fence we were working on. He looked at me. 'Go get the fucking pliers.'

I trudged across the hot dirt and spiky dry grass on my bare feet. I opened the toolbox and took out the pliers. My father and Robert were laughing, and I heard my father say something disparaging about Aboriginal people.

When we were finished with the fence for the day, we walked back to the shack, my arms straining under the weight of the toolbox. Mum made me a sandwich and Dad went off somewhere.

He returned later in the afternoon, pulling up in the old blue van. He got out. 'Come and give me a hand, Knackers.'

I trudged over as he opened the two rear doors. He dragged a roll of second-hand carpet from the cab and I picked up the other end. Together we carried the heavy sausage to our humble home.

Mum had her hands on her hips. 'Where did you get that?'

Dad winked. 'Fell off the back of a fucking truck.'

She rolled her eyes and we took the carpet, which we later found out he'd stolen from the tip, into the lean-to and started unrolling it.

'What about all the rocks?' Mum asked as she slipped off her thongs and started walking around on the carpet. I joined her, now that Dad and I had squared the carpet, more or less.

After living and sleeping on bare earth, the worn fibres felt like walking on a cloud, albeit a lumpy cloud.

Dad went to his toolbox and took out a hammer. ‘Dan’ll take care of that, won’t you, Knackers?’

I wasn’t sure what he meant, but when he dropped to one knee and brought the hammer suddenly fiercely down on a bump, I got it.

I took the proffered hammer from him eagerly, got down on my knees and started smashing the carpet everywhere I could feel a rock. It was great fun, and exciting. We were still in this tumbledown shack, with plastic tarpaulins and corrugated iron, but here was a reminder of the life my sister and I had known with Mum, in our old but neat Queenslander house in Maleny. This was a little piece of civilisation and comfort, even if it was only a second-hand cover-up of the reality of a life lived in the dirt. Literally.

By the time I had finished, my knees were red raw with carpet burn from chasing rocks and taking my frustrations out on them. I lay down, my cheek resting on the bristly fibres which smelled slightly of mould and things spilled in someone else’s living room. Some normal family had seen fit to replace this dated, ragged, stained old floor covering, updating to something newer, nicer and softer as the mother or the father made a little more money. Maybe the walls of that house had been painted, leaving it smelling fresh and brand new, maybe they had a pool where the little girl of the house could continue practising her swimming, maybe their dad didn’t swear and steal carpets.

My muscles ached from working on the fence, my knees were sore and my palms hurt from gripping the hammer too hard. The thing is, I didn’t feel like we were second best, like I was deprived or poor. I knew I wasn’t living a life like other kids did – it wasn’t even how my life used to be.

But it was my life and I could appreciate that lying on someone else’s old carpet was better than lying on rocks.

THREE

Mum’s dream was for the two of them to build a house, up on the hill where Dad had cleared the bush to make the round yard.

On the top of that hill, there was a view across the surrounding ranges and, more importantly, a cooling breeze. Where the shack was, by the front gate, was heavily forested and stifling hot during summer, with not a hint of a breeze.

Before the house, though, we had to have stables. Horses had as much priority as humans, if not more, at our place.

‘I don’t love the horses more than you two,’ Mum assured Susan and me one day, ‘though they do cost me more money.’ As she was quick to point out, we never went without a meal, even if times were sometimes tight and we had to resort to living off the land, shooting for the pot.

Mum and Dad set to work building a big shed that would serve as stables, tack room, hayloft, garage, workshop and accommodation for the family – in that order of importance and sophistication.

The elongated, slightly ramshackle structure had four stables built from old railway sleepers and the tack room at one end. There were saddles as far as the eye could see, and whips and girdles. The whole place smelled of leather and horse manure. There was a workshop with a massive anvil for shoeing horses, and, as if as an afterthought, our living quarters at the other end. The floors were still bare earth with stolen carpet laid on top, but there was now an indoor shower, a simple affair on a slab of concrete. We had a porcelain toilet by this stage, but it was outside and didn’t have any plumbing – the commode simply sat above a new long drop.

In the middle of the building was a covered carport with four spaces for a World War II-vintage Massey Ferguson Tractor, a horse float, Mum’s car and the blue van. There was a hayloft, ostensibly for the horses, but as I got older I would retreat up there to sleep, rather than on the ground. We now also had an indoor fireplace and some more furniture, including some more rudimentary benches that Dad had constructed from gum trees with a chainsaw. And on the hill behind Shack Mark Two, Dad had built Mum a chook shed.

I climbed down from the loft where I'd been doing my homework by the light of a paraffin lantern. We still didn't have electricity, except for an old diesel generator. However, there was never enough money for fuel to keep the generator going through the night, and we only ran it for a couple of hours during the day to get the deep freeze cold again. We also had an old gas fridge which was not terribly efficient.

Mum had lit a couple of candles, which attracted moths and other bugs into the living area. Midnight, our all-white cat, sauntered up to me, his tail brushing my legs. Stupidly I bent down to pat him and he hissed and lashed out, scratching my hand, leaving a red, itchy welt. That cat was feral and I never could pat him, but he kept the snakes away from the shack.

My sister wasn't around. She had left home, again. She'd only lasted three months before the toing and froing began.

'I *hate* this place,' was the last thing Susan had said after she'd left home for the last time, by which time I was thirteen. She'd been going back and forth from the shack to town, but now in her late teens and approaching womanhood, it looked like she was gone for good.

'She's been dating boys in Maleny,' I overheard Mum say to Dad. I hung back in the shadows, listening.

'So fucking what?' My father took a gulp of beer from a longneck.

First time she'd left, Susan moved to Maroochydore to live with my grandparents. Because she was older than me, she always seemed more worldly-wise, more grown up and wilder than me. Taking her away from her friends and peers during her teenage years had been much harder on her than the move had been on me, a boy still in primary school. I had missed my friends, but I saw life on the property, for all its hardships, as an adventure.

‘Things aren’t easy for girls, and even women, sometimes,’ Mum said. I wasn’t exactly sure just how close my mother and father were at that time, whether he was still on some kind of probation, where he earned points by feeding her passion for horses, but every now and then I picked up snippets of conversation that gave me an inkling of her complicated personal life.

‘Who gives a fuck?’ Cowboy replied.

‘I do. I get excluded from a lot of things and made to feel like I’m not welcome. I’m sure some of the other women don’t know what to make of me.’

Maybe people kept her on the outer because we were different. There were a lot of loose characters up there, living wild in the hinterland away from the coast, but even by local standards, we Keighrans must have been seen as a bunch of wild hillbillies.

Mum had spaghetti boiling on the gas cooker and when it was ready, she called me. Dad kept on drinking steadily during dinner and soon he and Mum started arguing about my sister.

‘I’ve had enough of this shit,’ he announced after a few rounds of bickering back and forth. ‘I’m going to the fucking pub.’ Fuck really was his favourite word.

I stirred in the loft later that night at the sound of a car engine – in the light of my cheap digital watch, I could see it was one in the morning. He’d driven back from the pub, pissed to the eyeballs. The sound of the dogs barking and the arrival of another car, a ute this time, woke me again, after the sun had come up.

‘What’s going on?’ I called down to Mum.

‘Nothing, Dan, just stay up there where you are.’ From the tone of her voice, I knew it wasn’t nothing.

I climbed down the ladder and crept through the shack. Mum was standing at the entryway, her hand over her mouth, clearly worried, as my father, shirtless and hungover, walked out to meet the two men who were getting out of the ute.

With the dogs still yapping, tethered to their run, one of the pair strode up to my old man and without warning smacked him in the face with his fist. Dad reeled back and tried to fight back, but the drink still in his system must have dulled his reflexes. The bloke was laying into him, the other guy just standing there, letting them go at it as Mum screamed for them to stop.

I went down to Mum, despite her having told me to stay inside.

'What's going on?'

She drew me close to her side. 'I don't know what your father said to this bloke last night in the pub, but for him and his mate to come all the way out here into the middle of nowhere, the morning after they've half-sobered up, then it must have been bad.'

I was learning some lessons about life even though Dad wasn't teaching me anything. My father is drunk in most of the memories I have of him from when I was growing up. Back then, I could see the good side of him, when he was working hard mending a fence, breaking a horse or organising the rodeo. He could be dogged and determined, and he really seemed to enjoy hard physical labour. But when he was done, he would drink too much and he would change. He had a good woman who, even if she was not sleeping with him, had let him back into her life – she had uprooted herself and her children to be with him. Despite all that, he often treated her like shit.

*

I came home from school one day, hot and sweaty, and went into the shed, and into our primitive indoor bathroom, only to find a dead, skinned bullock hanging from a chain wrapped around the exposed four-by-two roof beam. Blood dripped from the carcass onto the bare cement floor of our leaky cold-water shower and curled its way down the drain.

At fifteen I wasn't squeamish at all. I'd seen animals slaughtered – Cowboy did all his own butchering – and I'd been castrating bullocks since we got our first cattle at Lowmead. The sight of blood didn't bother me at all. I thought back to what Changi Anning had said to me about the difference between country boys and city boys; I hadn't had to eat bugs yet, but I was still fishing mosquito larvae out of the drinking water.

‘What’s that doing there?’ I asked Dad, pointing to the dead animal, when I saw Cowboy looking over my shoulder.

‘Need to keep the fucking flies off it, so it’s staying inside.’

‘What are we supposed to do for a shower?’ I asked.

‘Use a fucking bucket out of the tank.’

Great – more hauling water. Seeing I was already dirty and my only prospect of getting clean was to sluice tank water over myself, I figured I may as well get grubbier and have some fun. I went to the hayloft and fetched the ten-shot Ruger .22 rifle my grandfather had bought me for my eleventh birthday. We were light on for food at the time, with not much money coming in – that was probably why Dad had butchered the bullock – but until he’d hung it long enough and carved it up, we would need something more to eat.

I set down my schoolbag, changed into an old pair of shorts and a T-shirt and headed out.

‘Just don’t miss,’ Mum called to me with a smile as I left, ‘or you might go hungry.’

She didn’t think twice about me going off into the bush by myself, even though I didn’t tell her when I was coming back and she didn’t ask.

It was good to get away, to be by myself. I’d gone from missing my old friends at Maleny to appreciating time alone, in the bush. One thing about Lowmead, you didn’t have to travel too far to be in the middle of nowhere.

The rifle was reassuringly heavy in my hands, wood oiled and the metal of the barrel warm to the touch in the afternoon sun.

I came to a barbed-wire fence, and I removed the magazine from the rifle. I hadn’t cocked it, but Grandad had told me stories of farmers who had been out hunting and accidentally shot themselves while climbing over or under fences.

‘The gun is always loaded,’ Grandad had lectured me, time and again, drilling it into me. I put the mag in my pocket and scaled the fence.

Once over the other side, I slotted the magazine back into place. I scanned the trees, then remembered something else Grandad had taught me.

‘Look *through* the bush, not at it,’ Grandad always said. ‘Don’t just stare at the trees, Danny, you’ve got to look between them, deeper, and watch for movement.’

I caught sight of something grey flitting through the foliage. I drew back the rifle’s bolt and, as I did, a live round popped out.

‘Holy shit,’ I said out loud to myself, ‘how did that happen?’

I stood there, staring down at the bullet lying on the ground. My heart froze.

‘Always check the weapon first, Danny,’ Grandad had said to me, even before he taught me how to actually shoot. ‘Make *sure* it’s unloaded and the chamber’s empty, that there isn’t a round up the spout when you put it away and whenever you pick it up,’

He had worked the bolt in front of me, making it look easy, the small-calibre rifle almost toy-like in his old hands. When he’d handed it to me to have go, the action seemed stiff, but he showed me again, how to do it, and in time it became second nature to me. He taught me how to strip the rifle, clean and oil and then reassemble it. I would later meet guys and girls in the army who had never touched a firearm before they joined up, but guns had been a part of my life since I was eleven, though I am not a firearms nut. Grandad taught me that a weapon is a tool, like a carpenter’s hammer or a saw, something with which to get a job done. And a job done poorly could have terrible consequences.

When I had climbed through the fence, I had been sure the Ruger’s chamber was empty after the last time I’d used it but, clearly, I was wrong. I had failed to clear it when I last put it away. All that time, the rifle had been sitting in my room with a round up the spout.

The enormity of the mistake I’d made, of the danger I could have faced or what might have happened if someone else had picked up the weapon and started mucking around with it, sunk in. I felt ashamed even though there was no-one around to admonish me. I bent down and picked up the wayward round, brushed off the dirt and dust and put it in my pocket. It would stay there as a reminder to me.

I had shot ducks and rabbits for the family to eat, but now, staring back at me through the trees, was a kangaroo. It would make good food for the dogs and save Mum a few dollars.

Grandad had held the rifle up in front of me, just out of reach, when he first brought it to me. I was itching to get my hands on it and have a shoot, but he had plenty to teach me first. He looked me in the eye.

‘If you kill, you kill for a purpose, Dan.’

My purpose was to put food on the table for the family, or in the tray for the dogs, when my parents couldn’t afford to. Later I would realise that everything Grandad taught me about shooting, and some of what he passed on to me about life, had come from his time in the army. Other than shooting for the pot, there could have been only one other purpose that Grandad was talking about, from his war service.

I heard yapping and turned around to see Dad’s Jack Russell bounding through the bush toward me.

‘Shush, Jack,’ I hissed at him.

Jack burrowed under the barbed-wire fence like the ratcatcher he was, small and tenacious enough to ignore any obstacle put between him and an afternoon’s fun. He nipped at my heels and looked up, grinning. He had quietened down, though; he knew it was game on.

I moved forward, the rifle up, its butt snug in my shoulder, Jack creeping along behind me as we moved into the trees. I caught a flash of movement again and stopped. The kangaroo had taken a few bounds, but had also paused, to look back at us.

Slowly, hardly daring to breathe, I lowered myself to the kneeling unsupported position. I didn’t know it then, but thanks to Grandad I was already thinking in army jargon. He’d taught me all the military shooting positions – prone, standing unsupported, and the same for kneeling.

I lined the kangaroo up using the open sights of the Ruger. Grandad’s words were in my ear.

‘Don’t hold your breath, Dan, you’ll tense up. In and out, Danny, then a brief pause after the exhale.’

I watched the end of the barrel rise, then fall, rise again, then settle on the Kangaroo as I half-exhaled.

'*Squeeze*, don't pull, and keep your eyes open, Danny,' Grandad had said.

I felt the kick of the rifle in my shoulder, smelled the cordite and I was *sure* I had hit the kangaroo, but it bounded away.

'Shit!'

I ran, with Jack running and barking by my side. He overtook me, shooting away like he was rocket propelled. He was yapping his head off as he ran down the kangaroo. I was breathing hard, but I was fit and the twigs and small branches that lashed at me didn't slow me. I was as fired up by the hunt as Jack was.

When I caught up with him, I felt like I'd let Grandad down once again. As if climbing through the fence with a loaded rifle hadn't been bad enough, I could now see the kangaroo was wounded. It was flailing on the ground and Jack was between it and me, jumping and yelping with excitement. Jack advanced on the poor creature, trying to grab it around the neck with his little but deadly jaws, but the roo would half-jump, half-fall out of his grasp. I raised the rifle to fire another shot, to put it out of its misery, but Jack kept getting in the way.

'Get out of there,' I growled at him and moved in closer.

I had been the cause of this mess and I would not be able to finish the business off from a distance. In hindsight, I realised my .22 was suitable for shooting ducks, but not something as big as a roo. I went up to the kangaroo, feeling sick in the stomach over the mistakes I'd made and the pain I'd caused. I steeled myself and finished the job.

Dad had been shot when I first met him and I wondered what it felt like, to be hit with a bullet. He complained of pain from his gunshot wound from time to time. The bullet had fragmented and there was still a bit of lead lodged somewhere near his spine that gave him grief.

'Never point a weapon at another human being, Danny,' Grandad had warned me, 'unless you want to kill him, and you sure don't ever want to do that.'

When it was done, I skinned the kangaroo there on the spot. That was another mistake. I was far from home and I had to hoist the bloody carcass up on my back. Of course, I should have waited to gut and skin the kangaroo at home.

'I've fucked up here,' I told myself over and over as I trudged home, with Jack jumping and yelping all the way home trying to get his share of the hunt. I made it home, covered in blood, and shamefaced, but I had learned some more lessons about life. And death.

I know some people are against hunting, but for me it was a case of helping to feed our dysfunctional little family. There were other, far worse, times when I had to use my rifle. There were dingoes living in the bush around us and I remember many sleepless nights when the native predators attacked our cattle. They'd rip the arse out of a young steer and feed on it while it was still alive. On too many occasions, Dad would call me and we would share the job of putting livestock out of their misery.

We would also sometimes get cows stuck in the mud and there was nothing we could do for them. As hard as I tried not to make eye contact with these savaged or stuck cows, they would look at me like they knew exactly what was about to happen. I would tell myself that I was doing what had to be done, that there was no way to save the beast, but it felt as though those big beautiful eyes were looking into my soul.

City kids might learn about farms and food production from textbooks or excursions, but I was living a raw life on the land every day. I had wounded then killed a beautiful animal, and I was covered in its blood as I returned home to a shack where I couldn't even have a shower as there was another dead beast hanging in the cubicle. This was my life and for much of it I felt like I was being left on my own to find my way. My grandmother never visited Lowmead – she did not approve of my father at all – and Grandad would only make the journey, on average, once a year, though I would still visit him twice a year, during the school holidays.

Mostly, I was learning through doing, the hard way, and some of that doing was about life and death. Grandad had taught me a good deal and he had given me his old compass and showed me how to navigate through the bush. As for the business with the kangaroo, I'd had to use my own internal compass, with Grandad's guiding words as my true north, to learn from my mistakes and to find my own way in life.

*

One night, the sound of a car woke me, at two in the morning. I saw headlights on the distant ridge where the front gate was. From my room upstairs in the shed, on top of the hill, I could always see if someone was coming onto the property at night-time because of the lights. It had to be Dad, drunk.

If Cowboy wasn't home from the pub by ten o'clock at night, Mum would take the dogs with her and go out walking in the paddocks by herself. She didn't like to risk being around him when he was drunk and would only come home once she thought he was asleep.

I don't know if he ever hit her, but I remember some very heated arguments; he could get angry when he was pissed, and she didn't want to take a chance with him.

I, too, was lying in bed, wondering what sort of mood he would be in after a night on the grog, but I must have dozed off because when I woke again, this time two hours later, it was to the clatter and swearing of him stumbling into the house.

When it was daylight, Mum and I surveyed the damage. Cowboy was lying sprawled on the bed, his head a mess of dried blood, his body covered in dirt. He was breathing, but that was about it.

'I'm worried about him,' Mum said.

He groaned.

'What happened?' I asked.

'He must have fallen over when he opened the gate and knocked himself out.'

Cowboy was drifting in and out of consciousness so Mum called the ambulance.

‘They’re sending a helicopter,’ Mum said, surprised, and probably wondering if she had done the right thing.

Sure enough, the first helicopter I’d ever seen close-up was coming into land in the round yard we used for the horses and the rodeo. Dirt and dust and rocks and twigs were hurled outwards by the rotor downwash and Mum and I watched in stupefied amazement as an air ambulance doctor and paramedic in flying suits emerged from the chopper and, bent at the waist, jogged toward us with a sense of urgency.

Mum led them into the shed, to the bedroom, and I followed.

The doctor lifted one of Cowboy’s eyelids to peer into a bloodshot eye. ‘Have you been drinking, sir?’

Cowboy burped. ‘Haven’t had a drop.’

Just the mere act of forming those words, some of the first we’d heard from him since he staggered in, sent a cloud of alcohol fumes wafting through the room, which was already heavy with the scent of booze-infused sweat.

They took him away, probably so they wouldn’t have wasted a trip, and he must have been in a bad way, because it was two days before they let him out of hospital.

*

A few months later, it was the morning after one of the semi-regular Friday night barbies and piss-ups at our place and a swag of people had crashed out in the shed after the party, which had carried on into the early hours.

It looked like the aftermath of a battle, bodies strewn everywhere, some lying where they’d fallen, empty beer cans, wine casks and Bundy rum and bourbon bottles everywhere.

Mum, in her usual diligent way, was up and cleaning before most of the victims woke or were revived. Those who were still sleeping were lured into consciousness by the smell of bacon, eggs and sausages sizzling on the barbecue as Mum started cooking a recovery breakfast.

She worked efficiently and handed me plates of steaming greasy hangover cures to set down at the table as people fell into chairs. Cowboy was at the table and Mum was bringing his plate to him.

‘What’s Susan up to?’ one of the party guests asked drowsily.

‘That . . .’ my father mumbled.

Mum was between me and him, so I didn’t actually hear what he said. Mum still won’t repeat it, all these years later, but it was bad.

Mum had a theory that Cowboy was jealous of Susan, perhaps because when she came along Judy had to show some affection and devotion to someone else and call a halt to the droving life they had enjoyed. Susan, for her part, had made no secret of the fact that she hated Lowmead, and she and our father never saw eye to eye. I heard later in life that Cowboy had endured a rough upbringing and that he did not like his mother, in particular. Maybe that set a pattern for his future relationships.

Whatever the cause of his ongoing feud with Susan, and whatever he said, the result was atomic.

Mum hurled the plate of bacon, eggs, sausages and baked beans right into his face, like a slapstick comedian throwing a pie.

There was a moment of stunned silence and I guess that I, like everyone else there, was wondering which way this thing would go. Maybe he would laugh it off, or start a food fight.

No.

Cowboy bellowed some garbled war cry, swore and jumped up, knocking more food and cutlery aside. Guests scrambled for cover as my father went for my mother. She screamed and ran.

‘I’m going to fucking kill you!’ He grabbed a piece of timber, the four-by-two offcut from some half-done renovation and set off after her. He chased Mum out of the house and if he had not been so hungover, or still drunk, or both, he might have caught her.

On that occasion Cowboy, all six-foot-four of him, was also stopped by an immovable force, a worthy opponent in the form of one of our rural neighbours, little Jacquie. Weighing in at about half Cowboy’s mass and standing just a shade over five-foot tall, she planted her feet apart and hands on her hips as she blocked his path.

‘Don’t you dare hit your wife,’ Jacquie said to him as Cowboy loomed over her, his homemade club half-raised. ‘If you want to hit someone, hit someone your own size.’

‘Fuck off,’ he replied.

Jacquie half-turned, as if to walk away, then pivoted at the waist, brought her little balled fist up in a right hook and smashed it into Cowboy’s nose.

He screamed, dropped the timber and clutched at his bleeding nose.

Mum took off in her Datsun and didn’t come back until that night. Things had calmed down, but it was really just an uneasy truce between the two warring parties. The next morning, while Dad was sleeping off another hangover and the last few strangers of the weekend bender were snoring or stirring, I came down from the loft and saw that Mum was packing her little car.

‘What’s happening, Mum?’

‘Pack your things, Dan, we’re leaving. I can’t take any more of this.’

*

Mum and I moved to Forest Glen, near Maroochydore, where my grandparents lived. She got me into Nambour State School and I enrolled in Year Nine there, more than halfway through the school year. While I’d never been an outstanding student at Rosedale, at Nambour I was a total fish out of water.

Things were unsettled and a bit of a shock for me – I had gone from a school where there were thirty-four kids in my year to a college with 2000 students. Mum had found accommodation for her and me with one of her girlfriends and she was working in Nambour again, cleaning.

The lure of the river, where I had spent so many happy days with Grandad – and still did when I was officially on holiday – was too great. I would wag school and take my fishing rod and sit on the bank for hours during the long, hot days. I would have liked to have been with Grandad, but he would have had a fit if he knew I was skipping school. However, I was able to see Grandad more and spent nearly every weekend with him, fishing in his tinnie. It was great to be with him again, almost like a homecoming.

My mum may have been concerned at how I was fitting in, or not, at school, but she was too busy working and trying to make sense of her personal life to care too much, and my father, to use his words, would not have given a fuck if I was at school or on the moon.

Apart from the weekends things were unsettled for me; I even had trouble sleeping. The room where I was staying faced onto the Bruce Highway and the buzz of traffic, something I was not used to at Lowmead, kept me awake at nights.

One day when I did show up at school, I was greeted by a stern-faced English teacher who half threw an examination paper on my desk. On the top was a red ‘F’. ‘Is there something you want to talk about, Dan?’

I shook my head. I had always struggled with English at school, but now I was failing it. I was also generally having a hard time at the new school. For the first time in my life, I truly felt out of place. Kids will call out someone who is different and my time living in the bush in Lowmead marked me as someone unusual. I was teased and got into fights, and it was easier just to wag school.

Although my father was a verbally abusive borderline drunk, he was living in a house on a property that my mother had paid for. After about eight months in Forest Glen, Mum tired of living with her friend and we moved back to Lowmead, with Cowboy promising to behave himself.

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I returned to Rosedale State School for Year Ten, where I was much more at home with the country kids, and Mum was able to return to her beloved four-legged companions. With parents who were both absolutely mad about horses, it was inevitable that I would end up riding, but my mount, Benny-B, was a shit of a horse.

Saddle on my shoulder, I approached him, tentatively as ever. ‘Easy, Benny-B, easy, boy.’

As I threw the saddle on his back, he whipped his head around and snapped those big teeth. I tried to slap him away, but he was quick and I yelped as he bit me on the finger. Mum was out in the ring, doing her Western riding practice, so she didn’t hear me swear.

With Mum’s encouragement I had continued with my riding and was now big enough to saddle a horse myself. Benny-B was aggressive and recalcitrant and would do his best to throw me off every time I got on him. It actually made him the perfect horse to learn on, because if you could ride him, you could stay in the saddle on just about any horse.

I was developing a stubborn streak, and was not going to let Benny-B, or anything else in life, get the better of me. From my mum with her can-do attitude, to my grandfather’s wisdom and even my father’s love of hard physical labour, I had become the sort of kid who knew he had to get the job done, even if there were setbacks. If I’d cried or thrown a tantrum or walked off in a huff, there would be no doting parent to pander to me or hold my hand.

I climbed up on Benny-B, who tried to nip me again, and I rode him out into the yard. Unlike my parents, I never felt completely at ease on a horse. For them, a mount was like an extension of their bodies and, when I think of it, they were usually smiling when they were riding.

Mum caught my eye. She knew horses well enough to be able to see something in Benny-B that told her exactly what he was about to do.

‘Feet out of the stirrups!’

I felt Benny-B’s body shift beneath me and I, too, knew what was coming next. One of Benny-B’s favourite tricks was to drop to the ground and attempt to roll on top of me. I shook the stirrups off my boots and started to fling my right leg over the horse’s back. I ejected, jumping clear and landing hard in the dust just as Benny-B hit the ground and rolled over, hoping, no doubt, to crush me in the process.

‘Dan!’

I waved to Mum to tell her I was alright. She stayed back but kept an eye on me.

I had a love–hate relationship with Benny-B, and while I was wary, I was not scared of him. I dusted myself off as I stood and I locked eyes with him. He had stopped rolling and was starting to stand. I knew he was eager for round two, and so was I, but I was not going to let him best me. I leaped back up on to the saddle before he had time to get away from me.

Some time later, I was on Benny-B, mustering cattle with Mum. The air was thick with dust and the bovine smell of cattle on the move. Mum looked happy and at ease in the saddle and I soldiered on with the barely obedient Benny-B under me, no doubt plotting his next attempt at smashing my legs or breaking my back.

Mum was bringing the cattle around and I was out on the flank when the biggest bull I had ever seen became spooked and started charging, full pelt, straight toward Mum. Without thinking, I wheeled Benny-B around and drove my heels hard and sharp into the pony’s flanks. He took off like a mortar round out of a tube, channelling his malicious energy into a gallop that matched the bull’s mission.

My mum had stopped and I remember her open-mouthed stare as the black-haired freight train headed straight for her.

Pure instinct – perhaps combined with the daredevil idiocy that had convinced me I would be able to fly in my Superman shirt, and a dash of the refusal to be beaten that Benny-B had instilled in me – drove me forward. I used my legs to urge Benny-B onward and to steer him as I yelled at the bull at the top of my squeaky young voice to get away from my mother. If the bull intercepted me and collided with Benny-B and me then either, or both, of us would be ground into the dirt, but if I didn’t continue my kamikaze charge, then I knew the same fate awaited Mum.

On we tore, cows scattering, the bull lowering his horns for the kill. Dust swirled in our wake as Benny-B charged on like the finest cavalry mount ever bred, heedless of danger and ready to give his life for the cause. At the last second, the bull veered away.

I reined in Benny-B and came up alongside Mum. The dust hung and then slowly settled around us. My heart was pounding and my mum's face was ghost white.

'I was frozen,' she said, staring at me. I'd never seen my mum like this, so worried and so completely vulnerable. 'I thought it was going to trample me, to kill me.'

We were never a family that was big on emotions. I didn't know what to say.

'You just rode in there, Dan.'

I hadn't thought about what I was doing, it was as if my instincts took over. I hadn't even considered the danger to myself; I just knew that I had to put myself between Mum and that charging bull. There was a problem to be solved – how to save my mum – and somehow my mind and my body had known what to do in that moment, without letting the fear of harm to myself paralyse me.

FOUR

The rodeo.

When I mentioned in media interviews, later in life, that my father used to organise rodeos, the journalists would inevitably latch onto that little grain of truth. To them, it probably conjured up romantic images of Robert Redford cowboys – hard-riding tough guys with good hearts – clowns and rhinestones.

In reality, it was a massive piss-up, with my dad as the centre of the attention, and in the middle of the mayhem, just how he liked it.

Dad did organise the rodeo at Lowmead – yet more proof that when he turned his mind to something other than crime, he could make a good fist of it. All his mates would be there, plus hundreds of people from throughout the district.

Mostly, because of having busted his leg when he was younger, he would be the master of ceremonies. He would hook up the stereo and a microphone and amplifier to some big old speakers and in between calling the events he'd play Slim Dusty and The Rolling Stones to get the locals in the mood.

Behind the scenes, I was running around something fierce as Cowboy's free labour. In the days before I would be banging away with a hammer and nails, putting up temporary shitters made with corrugated iron and buckets – there was no money for portable toilets and, besides, it was Lowmead. He would have me mowing the grass, putting up signs and marshalling the trucks bringing in the horses and bulls.

Hundreds of people would come to the rodeo, but ahead of the actual day, we'd have a stream of riders, broncos and bulls coming to practise in the chute and the round yard.

Come the day itself, I would start off in the parking area, guiding people in, and then I would be dragging the buckets from the toilets to empty them and replacing the toilet paper. I fetched cases of beers and carried off cartons of empties, while Cowboy was behind the microphone doing the talking.

As well as cleaning up after the humans, I remember the smell of horse and cow shit, little old ladies selling jams on tables with white tablecloths, men and women laughing and drinking. Dad would start on the grog early, sometimes early morning, and drink steadily throughout the day. By the end of the night, when he and others were letting off illegal fireworks to celebrate the end of another successful rodeo, he would be blind drunk.

Even though I was not as fanatical about horses as my parents, it was natural that I would want to try my hand at rodeo riding. Later, as we settled into the property, I was given a few head of cattle of my own to look after and raise, with the promise that if I kept them in good condition, when the time came to sell them I'd keep the money made from them.

The first bull I rode was a steer that I had raised from a calf. He was my little mate and I was sure I would be able to ride him, no problem. For my first ride, no-one was around. He was quiet and calm as I moved him into the shotgun chute, the one that riders launched from during the rodeo. I got on his back and moved myself right up on top of his head so that I could reach up and open the gate myself, to let us into the round yard. I had the rope around him and held on with one hand while I stretched for the latch. I drove my heels into him, hard.

'Fuck me!' The young bull didn't need much encouragement. He charged hard and fast and I doubt I lasted three seconds before he shot me into thin air. He bucked me over his rump and I landed flat on my back in the dirt and sawdust.

As I lay there, winded and fighting for breath, the bull casually walked around me and lowered his head to mine, staring down at me with his big brown eyes as if to say: 'Okay, what was that all about?'

Later, in my teens, I rode in a couple of rodeos. At Miriam Vale one time, I was on a bullock and when we launched, he started bucking. I must have leaned forward as he was jumping up, because his head came up and butted mine as I was bending over. The next thing I remember was coming to, on the ground, face down with a mouth full of dirt.

‘That’s enough of that for you,’ my Mum said, shaking her head, ‘you need to stay alive long enough to finish school.’

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The clock on the wall of the classroom at Rosedale State School was ticking so slowly it was almost going backwards. Maybe the Queensland heat had fried the mechanism. Even the bright kids were having trouble concentrating as the English teacher droned on.

English was my worst subject. Sometimes in the texts we had to read, even individual words didn’t make sense. Mum thought I might have been partially dyslexic. All I knew was that English was like studying a foreign language to me.

Mathematics was different; I aced it. For a while, I even did advanced maths, but the teacher and I didn’t click so I went back to the regular stream. I was okay at physics and chemistry. I passed everything but was brilliant at nothing. Mum would help me with my homework sometimes, but she was as bad at English as I was. Dad never showed any interest in my schoolwork at all.

The closest I came to excelling at sport was long-distance running, which wasn’t surprising. The school bus that picked us rural kids up stopped about a kilometre from our place at 7.30 am every weekday. I was never early and would always have run to make it. From there, the bus dropped the little kids at the primary school in Lowmead and then took the rest of us to Rosedale, about a thirty-five-minute drive in total. I found that in the afternoons if I got off at the Lowmead pub I could run home from there and beat the bus by quite a margin.

The bus driver was a local and he knew where all the kids liked to get off, so he would drop me off by the tin shed next to the pub, which is exactly what happened on one regular Tuesday. That day, I thanked the driver, got off the bus and looked about. Dad had set up a shop in the shed, selling lucerne and hay from our property, but he was nowhere to be seen. I did the books sometimes after school, but there was no point in hanging around. More often than not, Dad pissed any money he'd made up against the wall in the neighbouring pub, rather than running it through the books and declaring it to the taxman.

I shouldered my backpack full of books and set off. At fifteen-turning-sixteen, I was as wiry as a greyhound. The heavy load bounced on my back as I headed into the bush, running cross-country. The bumps and knocks were nothing and my feet were sure as I jumped over a log. At school, I excelled in the 1500 metres, and would even lap some of the slower kids. I'd tried out for the regionals but on the day of my first big race, in Bundaberg, Mum got me there too late to compete. In any case, she never had the money that would have been required to drive or fly me to more events. I was top of the school in running and some other athletics events but being the best out of 300 kids didn't really count for much in the grand scheme of things.

I didn't care too much about competing. I enjoyed the run home and I liked being on my own in the bush, just like when I was out shooting. I gripped my backpack straps with hands that had sported callouses since I was eleven, when we had moved to the shack and the property. These weren't the hands of a little kid, they were those of a young man who worked the land, cutting ten-gauge fencing wire and driving a post-hole digger into the hard, dry Queensland dirt. I might have been a weedy, skinny redhead, but I was tough. My family life had seen to that.

A kangaroo hopped away at my approach and pink and grey galahs cheered me on as I ran. I felt like I could run all day if I had to. I didn't work-out – I had no need to, as I had plenty of hard physical work on the property to keep me fit. Every day I would lug buckets of water from the tank on the top of the hill to the horses' troughs, and once a week I had to water Dad's dope crop.

I could see home, up on the hill where the breeze blew. The shed had finally been replaced by an actual house, although in typical Keighran family fashion, it was a second-hand timber Queenslander that was going for a song. Mum and Dad had somehow found the money for it and it had been transported by road, in two halves, and plonked onto our block. We still didn't have mains electricity to the property, but we had a couple of solar panels and twelve-volt lighting in the house. It was, however, like everything in our lives, unreliable, and there never seemed to be enough charge to keep the lights on and run everything like a normal home would be.

I ran around the fields of turf and sorghum that Dad had sewn. The place had slowly taken shape, Mum and Dad had their horses and all that, but I couldn't wait to leave. An escape plan had been forming in my mind.

My sister had got out for good years earlier, but the last time I had seen her she was pregnant, at the age of nineteen. I knew that if I was going to get out of Lowmead, I needed to be able to support myself and to try to carve out some kind of future that didn't involve watching my dad get pissed or watering his drug crop.

That's not to say I was an angel.

As I ran up the hill toward the house, I decided to deviate via the chook shed, where I'd been working on my latest science project. I was interested in chemistry and I'd seen a movie in which a guy had a 'still' – an illegal distillery – so, at the age of sixteen, I had decided to build my own. I had found an old beer keg at the tip and had cut the top off it and filled it with corn mash and potato peels – I was making full-on hillbilly moonshine. The piping was PVC – I had wanted to use copper, but couldn't find any, and the PVC was workable, but the hot liquor was melting it. I'd had some success and had so far been able to produce one whole bottle, but it had been stolen.

Ian, our neighbour and the bushranger descendent, was the culprit, and he confessed the clear rocket fuel had fucked him up. It had made him terribly ill, so it was just as well I hadn't tried any of that first batch.

I was working on my mixture and had left the gas cooker on low under the old keg before leaving for school that morning. I walked into the shed, a big old open-sided affair, and went to check on my latest brew. My feet crunched on the crushed blue gravel floor of the shed, but as I approached, I could tell the burner had gone out. There was no smell of ’shine brewing, no hiss of the burner. The gas had probably run out, I reasoned.

I found the box of matches I kept stashed in the chook shed, lit one, lowered it to the burner and . . .

WHOOF-BOOM!

I remember a flash of bright light and being knocked arse over tit. Chickens were squawking and flying past me and dust and rocks and debris rained down all around. The chook shed – a bit of lean-to, like our original shack, tied together with rope and Cobb & Co hitches – was on its side. I could smell burning hair – mine – and when I ran my hands over my body and face to check for injuries, I felt bristly stubble where my eyebrows and fringe had once been.

Fortunately, none of the chickens were harmed in the making of this story. I worked out later that when the burner flame had gone out the gas had obviously continued to run through from the bottle and had settled and been trapped in the blue metal gravel floor. Mum was ropeable, but Dad didn’t seem to mind when he found out. Perhaps he thought I was turning into a chip off the old block after all, extending the family franchise from marijuana farming to bootlegging.

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I was getting to an age when I was starting to realise how different I was to other kids. Most of my friends had phones and laptops and while my mum had scrounged me an old computer from somewhere, the battery was crap and we never seemed to have the power to run it long enough for me to finish my homework.

Looking back on it, I was probably the worst-off kid at school in terms of how my family lived, but I never felt underprivileged or like the poor kid. I always started the day with a clean school uniform. I remember Mum, up to her elbows in brown dam water, handwashing our clothes, and using bleach to keep my shirt white. We ended up with a second-hand washing machine, but as with the fridges and every other appliance, it only worked if we had diesel for the generator. More often than not, I would chop wood and Mum would boil water over an open fire to do the washing. Her chores would stretch into the night, her eyes tired but always smiling, glittering in the candlelight as the cicadas chirped and mosquitoes buzzed around her.

She had known what she was getting into, reuniting with Cowboy and uprooting us. As tough as it was, on all of us at different times, she believed she had done the right thing. Moving to Lowmead was partly about living her dream again, following the romantic notion of freedom and a life on the land. It wasn't her fault that Cowboy turned out to not be the sort of father figure she might have dreamed he would be.

As I got older and started to fill out, I was expected to do more and more around the property. I learned to break horses, like my old man, and helped out with the mustering. I also learned to drive a tractor, on one that a big landowner in the local area, Monty, would loan us in return for us helping him with his cattle. We were improving our pastures and irrigation, and there was still the dope plantation, of course.

It was around this time that my sister, Susan, showed back up at the property with a couple of new additions: a boyfriend named David and their baby son, Bodhi. She steered clear of Dad, but Mum was pleased to see her, and was besotted with Bodhi. Susan had gone to university for a while but had dropped out and was now living in a little house in Lowmead near the pub, with David.

'What are you up to?' Susan asked me.

'He blew up the chook shed,' Mum said, disapprovingly.

I shrugged. 'Just school. And I've been mowing the lawns at the pub.'

'What are you going to do when you finish school?' David asked. 'I work on boats. I can get you some work on the prawn trawlers if you like?'

'Yeah,' I said, 'that'd be better than mowing lawns and mending fences.'

I wasn't old enough to leave school at that stage, but I realised that getting a decent part-time job might give me a little more independence and help me afford some of the things my family couldn't provide for me.

So while I was still in Year Eleven, David organised for me to go out on a boat he was working on one weekend. One of the deckhands had quit so they were short a man and I was asked to make up the numbers. He drove us to the coast, and he introduced me to the guys he worked with, and we set out. I was doing alright until we got caught in some big weather off the coast of Bundaberg. The huge waves tossed the boat around like a toy and I threw up over the side. It was the first time I'd ever suffered motion sickness and I felt like I was being turned inside out.

Even worse though was the feeling, for the first time in my life, that I had no way to escape the situation. As chaotic as my home life was, I could always decide to head off into the bush with my rifle to spend some time by myself. I had choices on land, but out on the grey, storm-lashed ocean I started to worry that I might not make it back to land alive.

There was nothing like an awesome, empty expanse of water to make you feel truly small and insignificant. I became starkly, frighteningly aware of my circumstances out there.

I certainly didn't think working on a trawler would be for me, long term, but money was hard to come by where I lived, so I signed on to do some trips during the school holidays. I was no stranger to hard work, but I had never worked shifts before. On the trawler, there was no routine, no schedule; only when the nets were full would the boat be brought in and unloaded, no matter what time of the day or night it was. The hours were long and irregular. It was, I learned, a tough way to make a buck.

David and Susan would come to visit Mum and me at home every now and then, and I guess David was trying to make an effort with me, because one day he handed me the keys to a car he'd brought up to the property.

It was an old station wagon, and it was a total bomb, but it meant I was able to get away. I didn't have a learner's permit, let alone a licence, but I'd get in the car and drive to the nearby Clarkes's property, not far from where we lived, where they held motocross events, and I'd borrow a bike and have a ride. If I wanted to venture further, I'd drive the old banger to Lowmead and park it at the pub and then jump on a bus. There was no police station at Lowmead, but if I'd driven any further from home I would have risked being pulled over by the cops based at Rosedale.

As well as the holiday job on the prawn trawlers, I still had my cows to look after, on the promise that when they were sold I'd make some money, so it was in my interest to ensure that they were well fed and cared for. I wasn't rolling in cash or wearing the latest designer labels or sporting a new model phone – I didn't have a phone, in fact – but I was starting to put a little money aside.

I was also becoming more sure of myself, cheeky even. It got me into strife a few times. Occasionally my dad would pick up stray people to come and do a bit of work at the property or just hang out with him and the horses. Steve, one of Dad's adoptions, would come out to our place to ride bulls, practising for the rodeo. That year, he'd become a semipermanent fixture and I pulled him up on it, albeit in a joking manner.

'You've been hanging around like a dog on heat lately, mate,' I said to Steve. It was true: Susan and David were having some kind of timeout on their relationship, I think, and Steve had been putting in the hard yards with Susan.

Steve didn't reply, he just picked up a .22-calibre air rifle that I'd been cleaning before he arrived and pointed it at me.

I remembered Grandad's words. 'Never point a weapon at another human being unless you want to kill him, and you sure don't ever want to do that.'

Steve smirked. 'You fucking cunt, I'm going to shoot you now.'

'Bullshit,' I said, calling his bluff.

Steve aimed high but pulled the trigger and I yelped. The slug had ricocheted off the corrugated iron roof and hit me in the right arm, in the crease between the bicep and forearm. Blood started oozing from the wound.

'What the fuck did you do that for?'

Steve laughed. 'It was an accident. Suck it up.'

I didn't tell anyone what had happened. I thought the slug had just nicked me, but it hurt like fuck. I cleaned the wound as best as I could and put a bandaid on it, but it continued to bleed for a while. The day after I was shot, I had to go off to Year Ten school camp, so there was no time to see a doctor or anything. I just had to hope it would heal itself.

The camp was actually held on one of the other kid’s farms. Candace’s family’s property was at Baffle Creek. It was a beautiful place, unlike ours. We all went canoeing, something I hadn’t done since I was much younger, but, randomly, I got an award for being the best paddler – even though I was nursing a bullet wound! I guess all that carting of buckets of water to irrigate Dad’s dope plantation by hand must have paid off. I wasn’t big in my upper body, and wouldn’t be for many years to come, but I must have had some muscle in those skinny arms.

My injury continued to hurt for several months, long after Steve had drifted away from the property, and out of Susan’s life. A few years later, it started causing me problems and when I finally had my arm X-rayed it turned out the slug hadn’t just nicked me, but was actually under the skin. It had worked its way toward the joint in my elbow. I didn’t get it removed until after I left the army more than ten years later.

After the camp, any dreams I’d had of how I might spend my growing wealth when I finally sold my small herd of cattle were dealt a fatal blow. My dad had been busted illegally transporting horses to the Northern Territory and given a fine.

A cop came to the farm to chase him up. I remember the patrol car coming up the track toward the shed and then stopping. Grandad had brought some fish with him to stock our dam on his last visit and I was sitting by the water, with a rod, hoping to catch one when I saw the policeman. I walked down, barefoot, to see what he was up to and it turned out he’d punctured a tyre. The constable stood there looking at his flat, probably reluctant to get his nice clean uniform dirty by changing the wheel.

‘G’day,’ I said to him.

He nodded in reply.

‘What are you here for?’ I asked him.

‘I’m looking for Ian Keighran. Do you know him?’

I sighed and nodded. ‘He’s my dad.’

The cop looked at me, probably wondering if I was going to run off and warn Dad so he could make a quick getaway like the outlaw he fancied he was.

‘Need a hand changing the tyre?’ I said to the policeman. ‘I’m happy to help.’

Bemused, he walked on up to the house while I changed his tyre for him. The officer served Dad with a $900 fine, but there was no satisfaction for me in seeing the long arm of the law catch up with him – Dad took my cows and sold them to pay the fine. To make matters worse, I came home from school one day to find my old bomb of a car, which David, my sister’s boyfriend, had given me, was gone. Cowboy had sold it to pay off another debt and I was back to scratch.

*

Mum was reading my Year Eleven school term reports, Dad was drinking beer from a longneck.

‘All C’s again in English. You’ve got to try harder, Dan.’

I was trying hard, in my own way. But the subject I studied the hardest for, English, was the one I was doing worst at. I would stare at the pages for hours to try to figure out what was in front of me, but to no avail. What Mum didn’t realise was that I was putting in a huge effort just to make those bloody C’s. I could find ways to get around my weakness with words, like typing work whenever I could get access to a computer, so I could rely on the autocorrect function, instead of relying on my handwriting and spelling. I also worked at being proficient at other things, such as mathematics.

‘You need good results to get a good job,’ she said, harping on.

Dad belched. ‘What are you worrying with all that shit for? You don’t need it. Go outside and feed the horses. And muck the fucking stable out while you’re at it.’

Mum rolled her eyes and the next morning she took me on her weekly trip to Bundaberg, on a mission to find me a job, or at least some work experience for the summer holidays. Because of our limited means, Mum would only shop once a week, for food and other essentials, and to fill a couple of drums with petrol.

Work was scarce in regional Queensland – still is – but Mum, in her usual way, was going above and beyond. I had told her I was interested in flying helicopters and it was at that point we had our first discussion about me joining the defence force. To be a chopper pilot, I would need good passes in mathematics and physics and at that time I was on track in both of those subjects. Mum found a company in Bundaberg that built kit aeroplanes and she lined up some unpaid work there for me for a few weeks in January. It was interesting, and I met some guys who told me there was good money and opportunities for aircraft mechanics, but it didn't fire my imagination.

Those trips to Bundaberg, which back then was the largest city I'd ever visited, reminded me that I had been living in isolation for too long. I wasn't naive – I had been exposed to plenty of life, including the seedy side, by my father – but as I walked the streets of Bundaberg on my breaks from assembling aircraft, I realised I was very unaware of the wider world. I needed to do something to remedy that.

As a little boy in Maleny, before we had moved to Lowmead, my friends and I had played soldiers all the time. We had our little green plastic army men – Grandad would buy them for me, and tell me all about the different weapons they had – and we would chase each other around the streets using sticks for guns, shooting wildly and dying dramatically.

I had considered joining the defence force, briefly, as a pilot or a helicopter mechanic, but I started to think about what else I might do. I knew what I didn't want – to work in an office. I had grown up wild, in the outdoors, and while my life was not always comfortable, the thought of putting on a shirt with a collar and tie, or a suit, scared me to death when I was sixteen.

I wanted something I could apply myself to. As always, Grandad's words were echoing in my mind. 'If you're going to do a job, do it once and do it right.' On that, if nothing else, he and my father had some common ground. Ian would, for sure, do a job the cheapest way, but he wouldn’t take shortcuts when it came to skills or hard work. As a man, his attitude when it came to the big questions of life was ‘she’ll be right, don’t worry about anything’, but if we were mending a fence or fixing a pump or working with horses, he would kick my arse if I didn’t put a tool or bucket back exactly where it belonged.

Grandad’s other dictum came back to me and now that I was older it was starting to make more sense to me. ‘You need to find out who you are as a person, Danny, what you represent, what you stand for.’

*

To help me concentrate on my studies during my last couple of years of school, Mum had rented a little house in Lowmead, near the pub, for me to stay in. This reduced my travel time and gave me more time to study, though there was little chance of turning my academic performance around.

It felt good, however, to cook and clean for myself, and it gave me a small taste of what life might be like if I could get out of Lowmead. Mum still wanted me back at home with her on the weekends, to keep an eye on me, I suppose, and so I could still help Dad out around the place. I ended up spending most of the week in the little house on my own, and then the weekends with Mum or helping Dad on the property.

I had always known there was something fundamentally wrong in my family life, but as a teenager I had so far chosen to ignore it. This adventure that my wayward father had dragged us on, living like nineteenth-century pioneers or American hillbillies out in the wilds of Queensland, was wearing thin. Going to school in Nambour had further convinced me that I was different, and it was time for me to make some decisions about how I might follow Grandad’s words of advice and work out who *I* was and what *I* represented and stood for.

I figured I had three choices. Option one was to stay on the property in Lowmead and grow drugs with my father. On the one hand, this was a viable plan as it might yield money one day and, in this part of the world at least, it was just what people did.

I thought about what Grandad might make of this option and came up with a resounding ‘No!’ I thought back to Grandad’s words again – was that what I stood for, illegal drug-growing and dealing?

What would Grandad advise me, I asked myself? He would, I was sure, answer me with a question or two: ‘What do you like doing? What are you good at?’ Then I thought what Mum would like me to do. That was predictable.

Which brought me to option two. Mum would say: ‘You need to do good at school, Danny.’ I thought about my results and realised that even if I redoubled my efforts, university was never going to be on the cards for me. On top of that, I still had a fear of ending up cooped up inside, in some sort of office job.

There was one other course of action, of course, that had been bubbling away inside me.

Option three. Join the army.

The next chance I got, during a holiday break, I went to see Grandad, to put it to him and ask his advice.

‘I’m thinking of joining the army,’ I said to him once he had greeted me and sat me down inside. ‘What do you reckon?’

He looked at me, his face neutral. I wondered what was going through his mind as he took his time, formulating his answer.

‘If you’re not sure what you want to do, Danny, the army will show you who you are and teach you about yourself.’

He was 100 per cent right. I had no idea what I really wanted to do, but maybe the army would, as he claimed, show me.

FIVE

‘Fire!’

The call came from Monty, the local landowner who sometimes loaned us his tractor in repayment for mustering work. He was now seated in his rural fire brigade truck, in his volunteer firefighter’s overalls, as he pulled up to our place to look for help.

‘It’s on the next property,’ Monty said, pointing to the billowing smoke above the trees. ‘Give us a hand, will you, or it’ll be your place next.’

I watched the grey stain growing on the sky and could smell the smoke. Flakes of ash were starting to rain down on our family home. The day was hot enough, the conditions terribly bad for a bushfire. Only people who live in the bush and who’ve lived through a big fire can truly appreciate just how terrifying this force of nature is.

I’d just come home from the pub – I hadn’t been drinking there but mowing the big lawn in front of the Lowmead Hotel. I’d dropped in to see Mum. It was part-time work and it had got me thinking about my future again. I was no stranger to work, but none of the jobs I’d had to do so far seemed like viable career paths. Dad did some commercial fencing work and I’d help him, carrying the coils of wire, lifting, straining, hammering. It was hard manual labour and the little it paid Dad pissed away.

At school and from the time in Nambour with Mum, I was becoming more and more aware of what other people had – and what we as a family lacked. I would see kids with new clothes and new bags, with a surfboard on a car’s roof rack. It didn’t worry me, not having these possessions, but I was becoming acutely conscious of the fact that it would not hurt me to be a bit better off, financially, than my parents. Certainly, if I wanted to escape

Lowmead and live a life of my own choosing, I would need money and, for me at least, that equated to a proper job rather than thieving or hustling.

Right now, however, the looming danger of the fire was more important than any of my daydreams. The blaze raced through the bush at a nightmarish pace toward our place, faster than I could run, certainly faster than the tractor parked nearby could move.

‘Can you drive that tractor?’ Monty asked me. I had no idea where Dad was.

‘Yeah.’

‘Get on it and start digging a firebreak,’ Monty said, his voice calm but with a no-nonsense undercurrent of urgency. On the back of the tractor was a back blade, used for ploughing. ‘Get rid of the grass along the fire line, stay parallel to it, but try and cut it off.’

‘Okay,’ I answered. Monty was under pressure and he was relying on me, a boy, to play a part in managing the approaching inferno.

‘Dan, listen to me,’ Monty said, his face grave.

I nodded.

‘If you get into trouble, you get off that tractor and you run. You let the tractor burn. Do you hear me, Dan?’

‘Yes, I hear you.’ *No bloody way*, my mind screamed. The tractor was one of the few valuable pieces of machinery we had access to. If I let the tractor burn, Dad would kill me even if the fire didn’t.

Monty drove off and I climbed on to the tractor. It started with a belch of smoke and I trundled toward the advancing front of the fire, like some kind of World War I digger blindly following orders to charge a machine-gun post.

Other people were showing up – reinforcements to take on the beast. There were more rural fire brigade trucks and people in their utes with pumps and water tanks on the back. I set to work on the fire break, bouncing over the rough ground, digging what would hopefully be a last line of defence to halt the enemy.

As I got closer to the fire, or, rather, as it raced toward me, I started to appreciate the force of it: the living, breathing soul of it. A tall gum tree, once so graceful and strong and permanent, exploded into flames and showered burning embers onto dry grass, spreading the beast's reach.

People were shouting orders, volunteers were beating out new spot fires, and people with hoses looked like they were pissing into a napalm storm. It was like the whole of Lowmead had shown up to take up the fight. It was all happening so very quickly. On the tractor, it was like one of those dreams where you feel like your feet are made of lead and you can't run fast enough to get away from the monster that's chasing you.

I've never been the sort of person who gets scared. Things that frightened some kids – the dark, people shouting, violence, abuse, hunger, poverty, bugs, snakes, guns, you name it – were part of my day-to-day life. But a fire . . .

But as I bounced along on the tractor, I felt so out of my depth and so uncertain, and a fear like I'd never before experienced was rising in me. I could see the danger in front of me, feel its heat searing my red sunburned cheeks. I had put on a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved shirt when I realised the fire was approaching our property, thinking I might have to help fight it, but I only had a pair of thongs on and the skin on my feet felt like it was burning from the heat of both the tractor and the hot air being exhaled by the fire. Witnessing the speed at which the fire was moving and seeing its unpredictability as the winds swirled toward our place made me feel like this phenomenon was completely beyond the control of us humans.

Not since I'd been tossed about in the prawn trawler in the storm at sea had I been so fearfully confronted with the perils of nature, nor felt so out of control of my surroundings. Amid the panic and the shouting, however, was a grave awareness that I had to think very carefully about what I was doing. There would be serious consequences for me if I did the wrong thing.

My actions in the face of that fire, I realised, could cost me my life. My brain yelled: *If you take a wrong turn, or get stuck in the wrong place, you will die, Dan*. Whatever course of action I took would have an impact, good or bad.

That day, I saw danger and I felt its burn. I felt the pounding of my heart and the rush of adrenaline. I did my bit, ploughing the firebreak, while the rural fire brigade set some back-burns. But the back-burns were too little too late, and the fire jumped the containment lines and only ended after it had ripped through and destroyed thousands of hectares of bush, before burning itself out when it reached the freeway. All the same, no-one was killed or injured, and our actions meant that there were no dwellings or livestock lost. We felt a collective sense of achievement and pride that it hadn't been worse and that we'd done our bit to help save our community. Most importantly for me, the tractor survived unscathed.

Afterward, I thought about the fire, and of Monty coolly issuing orders in the face of chaos, enlisting a boy to do a man's job and telling me what was most important – human life, not a hunk of machinery. I thought that maybe I'd like to be a firey, a firefighter, when I left school. That was only a year away now. I'd have to make a final decision soon.

*

It was a hot night, the cicadas chirping up a storm outside, and the only light inside the shack was coming from the screen of our old television.

Mum and Dad were outside drinking. I was home for the night and glued to the TV, watching a German film on SBS, the multicultural national broadcaster. As every kid knew, SBS movies had more sex scenes than all the other channels put together.

I liked girls, but I didn't know much about them. There was one girl at school I was keen on, Chantelle, and I was working on a plan that would allow me to see a lot more of her. But for now, SBS was the limit of my exposure to the female form.

I cocked an ear and heard Mum and Dad arguing. Good. The film was ramping up toward a juicy bit, with a German woman unbuttoning her blouse. I had turned off every light in our simple home, not to hide any nefarious activities, but to save power.

We still only had solar electricity, supplemented by a generator, when there was diesel for it. Mains electricity was still something that only other people had, not the Keighrans. The ragtag assortment of solar panels that Dad had fixed to the roof and a few old car batteries provided enough power to run lights at night and, if we were really careful, the television long enough to watch a movie. I'd turned off the lights to make sure the battery lasted long enough to get through to the end of the film – or at least, to the good bits. I wasn't overly engrossed in the story, but the young lady on the screen was about to advance my sex education to a new level. I leaned in closer, shoeing away the bugs that hovered around the light.

Fade to black.

'Shit.' The power had disappeared again for another night. I went to bed, frustrated.

*

I came home from school on Friday afternoon, running the seven and a half kilometres to Lowmead property to spend the weekend at home rather than at the little house near the pub.

When I entered the kitchen, Mum was busy cooking and Ian Kelly, our neighbour and drinker of my moonshine, was sitting at the small dining table. In front of him was a packet of cigarette papers, an ashtray, and a mix of tobacco and dried marijuana spread out on a sheet of newspaper.

'Young Daniel, sit down,' he said, gesturing to a chair. Mum carried on stirring the pot.

I shrugged off my backpack full of schoolbooks and sat down as he carried on. 'I'm going to teach you something very important, young man, a life skill.' Deftly he mulled up the tobacco and grass and then took out six flimsy cigarette papers. 'At some point in your life you may have a need of what I'm going to teach you now, in case of stress or whatnot.'

I looked to Mum and she rolled her eyes.

'I am going to teach you how to roll the perfect six-paper spliff.'

And so he did, carefully licking and assembling the papers – ‘Not too wet, Daniel, just enough to make the papers stick’ – and then rolling in just the right amount of mull.

When he was done, he held up his creation. ‘Behold. Perfection.’

This was what awaited me if I stayed in Lowmead.

‘Where’s the snake?’ I asked Mum. I needed to catch up with the week’s news.

We had recently taken on a new addition to the family: a large diamond python that my father had run over on the way home from the pub one night. He hadn’t killed it and was determined to nurse it back to health. Cowboy had instructed Judy to fetch some food for it next time she went on her weekly shopping trip to Bundaberg. She had returned with two live guinea pigs, which the snake had devoured, with relish.

‘Your father had to get rid of it. Took it out into the bush,’ she said.

‘How come?’ I asked.

Ian Kelly leaned back in his chair, lit up his massive joint, took a long, well-satisfied drag and gave a little laugh as he exhaled.

She looked at me, eyes wide with mild surprise. ‘I went to Bundaberg during the week to do the shopping and I asked for another two guinea pigs. The lady in the pet shop asked me what I needed two more for and I told her.’

‘Jeez, Mum.’

She nodded. ‘Yes, well, when I told her the truth, she refused to sell me any more.’

*

In Year Twelve, still at the age of sixteen, I joined the Rural Fire Service.

‘It’ll look good on your resume when you start applying for jobs,’ Monty had told me, after the fire, as part of his sales pitch to me to become a volunteer firefighter. I figured it wouldn’t hurt when I came to apply for the army – this plan was firming in my mind as my preferred option for an escape from Lowmead.

Mum might have thought she had done the right thing by bringing us back to Lowmead from Nambour, but I could tell that all was still not perfect – if it had ever been – between her and Dad. Although she had moved back into the family home, Cowboy was sleeping in the spare room. That was one of the conditions under which she had moved home.

He didn't seem to mind too much. A young woman had moved onto the property to learn about horses and Dad seemed to spend quite a bit of time with her. For my part, I was concentrating on my own future, not my parents'.

Because of our unreliable electricity and connectivity, there was not much use researching my prospective career online, so I found the number for Defence Recruiting at Bundaberg and called them from a landline. A few days later, an A2 manila envelope full of brochures arrived in the post.

I sat by the dam and flicked through the material. There were glossy pictures of men and women engaged in various jobs and trades, some with rifles, others wielding spanners and even pots and pans. Included in the package was also a list of mandatory educational and fitness standards that I would need to meet. I was a good runner, thanks to my afternoon jogs through the bush to beat the school bus home, but, judging by the entry criteria, I would need to work on my upper body strength. That day I started doing push-ups and sit-ups.

I went back to the house for dinner that evening. Mum asked how my day was, Dad ignored me. Seated at the dining table was Chantelle, who smiled coyly at me. Chantelle had some issues with her family and I, in a move of spectacularly successful strategising, had planted the seed in everyone's minds that she should come and stay with us for a while.

She was the first love of my life. I thought about the envelope full of brochures and the enlistment form in my bedroom. Chantelle would be the only person I would miss – perhaps the only one who would really miss me – if I followed up on option three, to enlist. I had already made up my mind.

After tea, we sat outside, holding hands, the cicadas calling. 'I've got something to tell you.'

She smiled. 'What is it?'

‘I’m joining the army.’

‘Oh.’

‘Yeah,’ I said.

‘I’ll miss you,’ she said.

I’d thought so. I felt a little bad, but I was set on this.

‘I’ll write you letters,’ she said, trying to sound bright.

‘It’s okay, you don’t have to, you won’t have the time,’ I said.

She looked miffed. I could tell she was keen on me, from the way she squeezed my hand, and the tender moments we’d shared. In fact, bad as it sounds, I knew she was keener on me than I was on her.

In my room, with the solar-powered batteries flat and no fuel – again – for the generator, I took out my torch and re-read the brochures. Rather than looking at the trades – cooks, mechanics, engineers and drivers – I focused on the page about the infantry. I read their mission: ‘To seek out and close with the enemy, to kill or capture him, to seize and hold ground and to repel attack by day or night, regardless of season, weather or terrain.’

The infantry sounded all about excitement and adventure and a life lived in the outdoors, not behind some desk or in a workshop – it was just what I was looking for at that age. The next morning, Chantelle and I went to a motocross event at Clarkes’s farm and I got talking to one of the women there, a teacher’s aide. She introduced me to her son, who was in the army and home on leave. He was a mechanic.

‘I’m thinking of joining,’ I said.

‘What do you want to do?’

‘Infantry.’

‘You don’t want to be a grunt, mate.’ He laughed. ‘You’ll be sleeping in the fucking dirt surrounded by mosquitos and they treat you like shit. No one respects you.’

That was my life already, I thought to myself. At least there I’d be getting paid for it.

SIX

On the morning of my first recruitment interview, in May 2000, I spent more time in my room getting ready than I ever had for anything before. This was the army I was trying out for – and from what I'd read, dress and bearing were important. I wanted to look as sharp as I could. I didn't have a lot of clothes to choose from, but this was another step into adulthood and the outside world, life beyond Lowmead. I put on my best pair of jeans and a decent pair of workboots. I found the best shirt in the house, a garish salmon-pink number, two sizes too big for me with turned-up cuffs that needed cufflinks. I looked like what I was, a skinny country kid from the middle of nowhere trying to dress like I wouldn't stick out in the city – and failing.

Mum drove me to Bundaberg and with each kilometre, I felt like I was getting closer and closer to a new life. I was buzzing with excitement.

I was worried about how I might be perceived, but when I walked into the recruiting office, I wondered for a moment if I'd come to the wrong place. There was a fat man in civilian clothes with his back to me, bending over, his bum crack showing above his elastic-waisted stubby shorts. He got down on his hands and knees, exposing way too much more hair and skin, as he struggled to plug something into a power point. I wasn't sure who he was, so I coughed, politely.

When he heard me, he hauled himself to his feet, smiled and put out a sweaty hand for me to shake. 'Sergeant O'Brien.'

'Dan Keighran, pleased to meet you.'

'I should be in polys,' he said, which I later learned was short for his polyester dress uniform, 'but I'll just stay in this gear for now. Been moving a bit of furniture around. Take a seat.'

While the sergeant caught his breath and found some papers in his desk drawer, I sat there, a little nervous, wondering if everyone else in the army looked like this remarkably ordinary man rather than the lantern-jawed Anzacs I'd seen in the recruiting brochures.

'So,' he said, leaning across the desk, 'you've had a chance to read through all the stuff I sent you?'

'Yes.' I licked my lips. 'I think infantry is what I'm suited to, and I'd like to apply.'

'Hmmm. How old are you?'

'Sixteen, but I turn seventeen next month.' I was too young to join up at that point, but I'd done my homework and wanted to get the ball rolling as soon as possible.

'That's alright. As you probably know, I'll need your mum's permission, once you turn seventeen, but we can start the process today.'

'I understand, thank you,' I said.

'It's a hard road,' Sergeant O'Brien said to me as he angled his face up to the rattling air conditioner on the wall. In hindsight, he was probably just going through the motions, giving the standard speech he gave to all potential new recruits, but I was sucking up every word. 'This life isn't for everyone, son. It will challenge you more than you've ever been challenged in all your young life.'

I nodded, sombrely, but inside I thought to myself: *You have no bloody idea what my life has been like, mate*.

*

According to the sergeant, I would need a bank account and a tax file number. How to pay tax was not something my father had ever explained to me, probably because he'd never done so in his life.

After the interview finished, I spent the next few hours in Bundaberg, walking the streets and going into banks, asking people what I should do. I found people were happy to help and I set myself to the task of establishing a legal identity, like a person with a proper job. Mum was doing her normal weekly shop and she picked me up outside the bank, where I had just opened my first account.

‘How’d it go?’ she asked me.

I spoke to her with a clarity of mind and purpose that I’d never really had a need for in the past, like I was talking to her as an adult, for the first time in my life.

‘This is what I’m going to do with my life, Mum, I’m sure of it.’ I produced the form the recruiting sergeant had given me. ‘I need you to sign this bit of paper for me the day I turn seventeen.’

She gave a little laugh. Mum was happy for me, but I could hear a note of apprehension in her voice as we chatted in the car. My birthday was only a month away. ‘You certainly seem to have thought all this through and planned it properly, Dan.’

‘I have,’ I said.

I could almost taste the freedom which awaited me, but it was, agonisingly, just out of reach. I still needed to turn seventeen and finish six more months of high school before I could join up. I also needed to pass a battery of fitness, health and psychological tests, but if I aced all that, as I was sure I would, my intake into the army would be in early December.

Sport was one thing I still excelled at. In Year Twelve I was made the sports captain. On top of continuing to do well at running, I had started refereeing the local touch football competition. It was the year of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games and the school librarian, Mrs Bower, encouraged me to apply for the Australian Olympic Committee’s Pierre de Coubertin award, which recognises school students’ commitment to school sport and Olympic values. I received one of the awards and as a result was also chosen to be one of the runners who carried the Olympic flame when the torch relay passed through Miriam Vale. It was a big deal locally, with most of the town turning out, although I ran along the Bruce Highway through a stretch of bush in the middle of nowhere.

Although my life had been unpredictable, wild and woolly, even rough by some people’s measures – okay, by most Australians’ standards – in one respect it had also been sheltered. Apart from living in my little house in

Lowmead during the week while studying, I’d never been away from home, from Mum, for an extended period except for one school camp.

However, I was no stranger to being by myself and was comfortable being alone. Sometimes I’d camp out in the bush, with my rifle. I’d make a fire and go to sleep in the grass, nodding off as the flames died to embers and waking in the cold pre-dawn, watching the moon go to sleep through the gum trees.

Isolation gets to some people – they need others around them all the time and they can’t get used to being on their own. Not me. Maybe it was partly to do with being brought up in the cramped communal conditions of the shack for so many years, but I was always happy for some time by myself.

Now, however, I was readying myself to join the biggest team in Australia. I’d be living in a barracks alongside other blokes from around the country, with backgrounds far more diverse and different to mine.

*

On my seventeenth birthday I filled out the hard-copy enlistment form in my best handwriting and posted it to the recruiting office in Bundaberg. A few days later, I received a letter on Australian Defence Force letterhead saying I had been accepted for initial testing, in Brisbane.

Mum drove me to Bundaberg Station, where she gave me fifty dollars in cash and put me on the train, with a kiss.

When I alighted at Brisbane’s Roma Street Station, I felt like I had landed in another world. Bundaberg, a regional centre, was the biggest city I’d ever been to, but this place was like something I had only seen in movies – well, the bits I’d seen in between the power going out. There were people everywhere and while the army had sent me a voucher for a hotel, which I would have to find, my first challenge was to get out of the railway station.

‘Excuse me, mate . . .’ I said to a man, hoping to get some directions, but he just looked down and walked briskly on, ignoring me. I’d never encountered such rudeness.

‘Excuse me, mate,’ someone else said to me, and I looked around, but couldn’t see anyone. When I looked down, I saw a man in smelly, dirty clothes, sitting on the ground. He was holding up a cardboard box to me, beseeching me. ‘Excuse me, mate, got any money for a homeless guy?’

Bloody hell. We were poor, but I’d never met an actual beggar in all my life. I put my hand in my pocket, but all I had was the fifty-dollar note. Now I felt like the rude one, because I couldn’t help him. ‘Um, sorry, mate, no, I don’t have change.’

Embarrassed, I walked on. Dressed in my best old jeans and a loud checked shirt, I must have looked like the hick I was. Tentatively, I put a foot on an escalator, hoping I was going the right way. I had never been on one of these moving walkways in my life. Everything was a new experience.

With luck I passed my first navigation test and found the Pullman Hotel, very close to the station, on the corner of Ann and Roma streets. I showed my voucher and signed in and caught the lift – another first – up to my room. It was the most luxurious accommodation I had ever been in, with its own TV, as much electricity as I wanted, and carpet without dirt and rocks underneath. I bounced on the bed and let out a whoop.

My paperwork had told me that breakfast and dinner would be covered, but I didn’t know if that included soft drinks or juice, so I went to the bathroom and gulped water from the tap. I had arrived in the late afternoon and my tests were the next morning.

I went downstairs to the restaurant and had a steak in surrounds that left me goggle-eyed. I felt self-conscious in my cowboy shirt, but at the same time I was floating along in an almost dreamlike state. Here I was, a world away from Lowmead. All I needed to do now was to pass.

Back in my room I was a bundle of nervous energy, pacing back and forth, checking out the room information and the various remotes. I tried watching TV, but couldn’t concentrate, and I was too wired to even lie down. I figured that I needed to work off a little excess energy, to help myself sleep, and to ensure I would be ready for the next day. The physical side of the testing included the beep test, running between two markers at increasing speed keeping pace with progressively shorter ‘beep’ signals, and push-ups. I figured that with the running I had been doing every day to beat the school bus home, I would have no trouble passing the beep test, but with my still-weedy frame, the push-ups were a concern.

I unlatched and opened the glass sliding door to the balcony. Traffic hummed outside, a change from the incessant chorus of the cicadas and mozzies, and people below scurried back and forth like termites coming and going from the mound. I dropped and punched out fifty good push-ups.

The exercise left me agreeably sore and suitably exhausted. I undressed and got into bed, between cool, crisp hotel sheets, and tried to shut out the buzz of cars and my own nerves. I never thought I would get to sleep, but the alarm woke me the next morning.

At the recruiting office I changed into shorts and T-shirt and running gear and did a few stretches.

‘First time?’ the guy next to me asked.

‘Yep, you?’

‘Third.’ He grimaced. ‘I’m here for another re-test.’

Bloody hell, I thought to myself. I was nervous enough, but now I started to worry that being accepted was not a foregone conclusion. This organisation must be serious, I thought, if they were knocking people back on their second attempt. The first ‘beep’ sounded and I set off, adrenaline surging through my body.

At the end of the running test I was pleased to see that I was in as good a shape as the best of the runners. Some of the others were wheezing, doubled over, and had clearly struggled. With adrenaline pumping, I moved on to the push-up test.

These were also done at a count and as soon as I started, I realised I had done something terribly stupid. The fifty I had done the evening before, less than twelve hours earlier, were coming back to haunt me. My arms felt sore when I began and by my tenth push-up, I was dying in the arse. I started to panic, summoning every last ounce of energy just to struggle through to the minimum number.

A physical training instructor in black army shorts and a muscle-hugging red T-shirt glared down at me as I collapsed on my belly. With shame, I thought of the people who had struggled through the beep test and how superior I had felt toward them.

Dan, you are an idiot, I thought to myself, as I struggled to get up. I had visions of having to make the trip to Brisbane all over again, perhaps two or three more times. Maybe they would reject me out of hand. Up until then, I had thought I was bulletproof.

‘Not good enough,’ the stern-faced instructor said to me as I hauled myself to my feet. ‘You need to work on your bloody fitness, son. That’s the minimum we’re asking of you, but you should be able to do three or four times that many.’

In true army style, they did not give us a definitive answer as to whether we had passed the basic testing and been accepted for recruit training straightaway. Instead, we were told we would be notified by mail.

I had struggled through to meet the bare minimum required, but I wondered if the instructors had some discretionary power to reject me, based on their perception of my fitness. I had wanted to explain about my work-out the evening before, but I was sure it would have fallen on deaf ears.

Back in Lowmead, I resolved that even if I had failed, I would be able to pass the tests again if I had to do them over. Every morning I ran a kilometre down to the postbox to check the mail, through the creek that saturated my boots, then all the way back again. I was still at school, finishing off my Senior Certificate, and when I was staying at home rather than in the little rented house in Lowmead, I kept up my routine of getting off the bus at the pub and running the seven and a half kilometres through the bush to home. In my spare time, I did push-ups and sit-ups like they were going out of style. I was, for the first time in my life, truly driven by something.

One morning I arrived at the postbox and there was a letter. I ripped it open, ran home, my heart swelling, and called my grandfather from the home phone.

‘Grandad, I got the letter,’ I gushed. ‘I’m in!’

‘Congratulations, Danny,’ he said, matching my enthusiasm, ‘it’ll change your life. The army will take you places you never thought you’d go. It’ll broaden your horizons and do something for you.’

It would get me out of Lowmead, that was for sure – and that was the most important thing for me.

*

Once I’d been accepted into the army, I became even less interested in my schoolwork. My recruitment was not subject to me achieving a great Senior Certificate result, so I saw no need to apply myself further.

My focus changed to my impending new job. I spent hours on the computer in the school library looking up all things military and bought copies of *Infantry* magazine. In 1999 Australia had deployed its largest contingent of troops since the Vietnam War, to East Timor to Australia’s north. The East Timorese had risen up against their Indonesian colonisers and pro-Jakarta militias had been involved in fighting with local guerrillas and terrorised the population. Australia was taking the lead role in INTERFET, the United Nations–sponsored International Force East Timor, to restore and maintain peace in the troubled country. By day I continued to work on my fitness, and by night I read up on infantry tactics.

When school finished, I didn’t bother with a ‘schoolies’ celebration. Instead, I decided to spend my last two weeks as a civilian with my grandfather.

Mum and Chantelle took me to Bundaberg and both hugged me as they put me on the train to Nambour. As the train pulled away from the station, I didn’t even look back. At last I was getting out of Lowmead and the crazy life I’d landed in.

Grandad picked me up and we didn’t waste too much time before we were out on his little tinnie, fishing on the river, like we had done for as long as I could remember. He let out the bait net, but when he started pulling it in, I could see he was straining a little more than the last time I’d seen him do this familiar task. I helped him, now that I was strong enough to do what had always been the grown-up's work.

'You know, I was in the militia – the part-time army – before World War II started,' he said to me.

'I didn't know that.' All I'd known was that he had served in the war, but he had never talked to me about his experiences. He'd passed on lessons, such as how to shoot, but he had never been one for war stories. Perhaps he felt that now that I was about to join, he could finally open up.

'I was in the artillery. It's not like in the movies, Danny, some terrible things happen.'

I nodded, content to leave the talking to him. I watched the end of my fishing line, where it entered the water, but for a change my mind was not really on the fishing. I was silently hanging on his every word.

He took a deep breath. 'Accidents happen. One day, because of an error, we ended up shelling our own troops. It was a bloody terrible day, Danny. We killed them all.'

He looked down the river, away from me, somewhere into the distance. I wondered how something like that could happen.

'The explosions ripped them to pieces and when it was done, we went and saw the results of our error.'

It was no wonder, I thought, that he had not wanted to talk about his experiences. I felt mixed emotions, right then, almost a sense of pride or honour that he had chosen me to unburden this terrible memory to, but also a sense of deep responsibility that I must listen and learn from what he had gone through.

This was the stuff of men, of blood and family, the sort of lesson that a father would pass on to a son. I realised that Grandad would be the only member of my family I would miss when I went away to the army.

He looked back at me after a while and though his eyes were moist, he forced a smile to his lips and some lightness to his voice. 'This will be a good career for you, Danny, a good fit for you.'

I nodded. That was what I wanted to hear, and I found myself desperate and grateful for his approval of my decision. 'Have you got any advice for me?’

‘Work hard in life, generally, but especially in the army – they don’t like shirkers, people who don’t pull their weight. However, during your training, don’t try to stand out too much. No one likes a show-off, who tries to get all the glory. In the army, they have a name they use – the ‘grey man’. That’s someone who does their job and does it well but doesn’t seek glory. Try to be that man, Danny. If you put in the hours and the hard work, then good things will come of it eventually.’

‘What do you think of me wanting to join the infantry?’ I asked him.

Instead of disparaging my choice, like the army mechanic I’d met at motocross had, Grandad thought about it for a few moments. ‘It’ll enable you to work out who you are. You’ll be working in groups, teams and, eventually, command positions in a couple of years if you do well. There are few other jobs where you might have to make life and death decisions at such a young age.’

When our long, lazy day of fishing ended, we went back to his place, and while Grandma made us tea, he disappeared, then came back with a cardboard box. On the coffee table he unpacked a treasure trove of his dusty military memorabilia, pay books, dog tags and old black-and-white photos.

I picked one up. It showed a young man in uniform, Grandad, standing in a trench with snow all around. He had served in the artillery, with the 2/4th Field Regiment.

He smiled. ‘That was Syria. Bloody cold place.’ He told me he had served there in 1941 and, before that, in Palestine and Egypt. He returned safely to Australia, married my grandmother, Norma, and then my mum, the eldest of their three children, came along in 1944. That year Grandad went back into action, serving in New Guinea, then on the island of Morotai and, finally, taking part in the invasion of Borneo at Balikpapan in 1945.

I sorted through the photos, pausing on one that showed a line of 25-pounder artillery pieces, and another of him bent at the waist, peering through a gun sight. ‘I had no idea you had done all this stuff.’

Another picture showed a light aircraft. ‘That’s a spotter plane,’ Grandad said, then looked away, like he had done on the river. ‘A mate of mine – one of the captains, but a good bloke for an officer – went up in one of those and he never came back. No-one knew what happened, but I read later on that they found the plane, just a few years ago. I'd been thinking about him, on and off, all this time. That's the sort of friendships you make in the army, people you never forget, whatever happens to them.'

I realised, sitting there, how little I knew about this man and his life, even though he had taught me so much. These experiences he was talking about had moved him, had shaped him, and probably made him the principled man that he was.

'I had an argument with an officer on the gun line one day.'

'What about?' I asked, eager to encourage more of his memories and stories, now that the door had been unlocked.

'The officer – he was a new subbie, a subaltern as junior officers are called – had the fire mission all wrong. He was about to give the order to fire and I knew that we would have ended up shelling our own blokes again. I had it out with him and, believe me, back in those days that was something a soldier just did not do with an officer.'

'Wow.'

He nodded. 'But the thing is, Danny, sometimes you need to stand up for yourself, even if it's to an authority figure. You need to have the confidence to back yourself. I took a risk, but if I hadn't then we would have had more men killed.'

I was no longer seeing this man through the naive eyes of a child. He was my grandfather, my father figure, a mentor, and now I was learning he was so much more than that. At that moment, listening to those stories, I respected him as a human being more than ever before.

'This is the reality of life in the army, Danny,' he said. 'There's no point in my sheltering you from the bad stuff.'

We talked a little about the situation in East Timor and the reality of the job I was about to undertake, and while he was being very open with me I did not get the feeling that he was trying to scare me or that he was overly worried for my safety, as one would be for a child. He was, it dawned on me, talking to me like an adult, man to man.

Then he said those words that he had repeated many times during my life, but which now had a resonance and a clarity I had never before appreciated. ‘You need to find out who you are as a person, Danny, what you represent, what you stand for.’

The sultry December days passed in a serene haze, as calm yet as insistent as the river we fished on. I knew this time would end; on one hand, I wanted it to go on, forever, but on the other I was impatient for my adventure to begin.

We fished nearly every day, catching live bait with a net in the canal behind Grandad’s place on the way down to the river and then taking them to the cod hole under the bridge and the deep water at Bligh Bligh. We caught yabbies on the mudflats at Sand Island just like we’d done when I was little and had been mesmerised by the workings of the yabby pump. When the forecast looked too hot, we would go out at midnight, the moonlight sparkling on the river’s surface, looking for jewfish, and not return until midday, then do it all again. The routine was part of the charm of this life – the polar opposite of the chaos I had lived through in Lowmead. We would clean the boat, fillet the fish, have a snooze, then eat fish for our supper. He loved it, and so did I.

On the odd day we didn’t fish, or in the afternoon, we would swim in the pool. Grandad swam to stay fit and loved the simple repetition of the exercise. I wondered if in those years in the war, in the snows of Syria and the scorching heat of the Western Desert, he had dreamed of a life like this, spent on and in the water.

As peaceful as those two weeks were, I gained a growing appreciation of the gravity of what I was about to undertake. In the evenings, we would sometimes watch the news and one night there was a report of a clash on the border of East and West Timor, between Australian troops and pro-Indonesian militia. Shots had been exchanged and Grandad and I were glued to the television.

I realised, *Shit, I’ve signed up for this, and that could be me in twelve months time*.

I had been so fixated on getting out of Lowmead that I had not spent enough time thinking about where I was going and what I was potentially getting myself into.

The night before I left, Mum came down from Lowmead and we all had dinner together – her, Grandad, Grandma and me. There was no sign of my father. Mum gave me another fifty-dollar note and the next morning Grandad took me to Nambour railway station, just him.

I had a green duffel bag I had purchased from a camping store in Bundaberg, and a few changes of clothing. I had no computer, no mobile phone, no other possessions. Grandad clapped me on the shoulder.

‘Good luck, Danny.’

SEVEN

I stood in a hallway, flanked by men, all of us dressed only in our underwear and each sporting a bedsheet draped over our shoulders.

Our instructor, a bombardier, was berating me because once again I had called him ‘Corporal’, the term of address used in the army for a two-striper, except for those two-stripers who are in the artillery. It wasn’t the first time I’d made the mistake and his anger was enhanced by the fact that the army was changing and he was not allowed to shower recruits with verbal or physical abuse, as had been the case in the good old days.

‘I’ve been pulled up, by the commanding officer, Keighran! I can’t fucking swear at you anymore or call you a fucking idiot if you get my fucking rank wrong again! But I just can’t seem to help myself! So, if I am fucking offending you, I am fucking sorry!’

It took a good deal of effort not to grin. I’d heard that sort of language every day from my father and while some of the new recruits trembled in the face of the bombardier’s verbal abuse, it did nothing to me. I kept my eyes straight ahead and only half-listened to him. Instead, I zoomed in on a framed picture on wall across from me, and read about a man named Albert Jacka.

The recruits at Blamey Barracks, Kapooka, home of the 1st Recruit Training Battalion, had been divided into platoons, each made up of thirty men and women. Each platoon had a name and I had been put into Hall of Valour Platoon. Lining the walls of our barracks building were pictures and citations of Australia’s Victoria Cross recipients, from the Boer War to the present day. We even had the Victoria Cross printed on our platoon T-shirts, which we had to wear for PT – physical training.

‘Are you fucking listening to me, Keighran?’ my instructor bellowed into my face.

‘Yes, Corporal . . . I mean, Bombardier.’

My deliberate mistake sent his rage into orbit and gave me time to finish my reading.

Albert Jacka, like every Victoria Cross recipient, was an ordinary bloke. He had worked in the forestry department in Victoria before joining the Australian Imperial Force and sailing off to Gallipoli. There, he had found himself, as a lance corporal, defending a part of the Australian trench line called Courtney’s Post.

In May 1915, during a Turkish offensive, the post was overrun. He and three other survivors of the attack tried to counterattack, the plan being that Jacka would climb out of their trench, exposing himself to fire across the deadly no-man’s-land between the Australian and enemy positions while he outflanked the Turks and attacked them from the rear. The rest of the party were either wounded or pinned down, but Jacka surprised his foes. He took the trench singlehandedly, shooting three men, bayoneting two and forcing the rest to flee. All through the ensuing night, Jacka defended the recaptured post by himself.

What possesses a man to do something like that, to deliberately put himself in harm’s way, I wondered as the bombardier literally sprayed more invective at me, his face close enough to mine for me to feel spots of spittle on my face.

As if that wasn’t enough, Albert Jacka, like many other diggers, went on to serve on the Western Front. There, his actions under fire earned him the Military Cross, not once but twice. He went on to become a businessman after the war and later the Mayor of St Kilda, where he was recognised for his work in helping unemployed people down on their luck during the Great Depression.

Once the bombardier was finally all out of fucks, we were dismissed and sent running back inside to make our beds. There was never enough time to do everything we had to, but that was part of the training, to turn us into efficient soldiers, used to accomplishing myriad tasks as quickly as possible and without question.

I laid the sheet on my bed and with the deftness of a hotel housekeeper executed some near-perfect hospital corners before aligning the scratchy woollen blanket so that the stripes ran exactly down the centre. I used a ruler, as did everyone else, to measure the turndown of the sheet. After I dressed, in record time, and put on a belt with brass keepers that gleamed from being polished the night before, I checked my locker to make sure everything was in its correct, mandated place, and that my green army socks had been correctly folded and positioned so that the smiley faces created by the folds were facing outwards.

My basic training at Kapooka, near the regional town of Wagga Wagga in southern New South Wales, was passing in a not entirely uncomfortable blur.

‘How you doing?’ one of the guys near me asked his mate, as I laced my boots.

‘Okay, I guess, but I called the wife and kids yesterday and they’re missing me. It’s getting me down.’

There was a mix of people in Hall of Valour Platoon. Some were young and a bit naive, like me, but others were older and had families and loved ones who were missing them. I didn’t envy them their happy homes that they had left behind in order to become soldiers; some of them were really suffering. I missed nothing about Lowmead or the life I had left behind.

As I wiped down the windowsill nearest my bed – cleanliness was always part of an inspection – I continued to eavesdrop on the man whose morale was flagging because he was homesick. *Is that what it’s like to be part of a normal family – to be miserable, because you’re away from them?* I wondered. If it was, then it wouldn’t have helped me at Kapooka – the only person I had to care about was myself. I didn’t see it as a bad thing at the time.

While a lot of recruits were finding Kapooka a spartan, challenging culture shock – and that was part of the deal – for the most part, it was an improvement on my former life.

For a start, I was getting fed more and better food than I'd ever had in my life, and for a seventeen year old, that was important. I was getting fitter by the day – I could do the required 2.4 kilometres in less than nine minutes, and while I still struggled with my upper body strength when climbing ropes on the obstacle course, I was getting stronger. On top of all that, I had a cupboard full of clothes, a proper bed and money.

I never once felt, as some of the others did, that Kapooka was getting me down. I had grown up with nothing and I had never been spoiled or indulged. Grandad had taught me to be neat and orderly, even among the chaos of my home life. I had always made my bed in the morning, even when I was living in the dirt; I sorted my clothes before washing and I cleaned the dishes after dinner.

I had come so far so quickly. The train ride to Brisbane was a dim memory, even though it had only been a week earlier. I'd spent the night in the Pullman Hotel again and been restless, unable to sleep with nervous anticipation. As I was still only seventeen, I couldn't even go out to a pub and drink. Instead, with my new freedom, I had stayed up watching porn movies until late, making the most of the limitless electricity. This indulgence, however, came at a big cost – I'd had to use the fifty dollars Mum gave me to pay for the in-house videos when I checked out.

I flew from Brisbane to Sydney, my first time on an aeroplane, and was put on a bus to Wagga Wagga. We arrived late, everyone wrecked from travelling, and I guess that was all part of the conditioning. With people barking out instructions to us, we had been run from place to place being issued uniforms and equipment and having our heads shorn like sheep. We were told once how to do something, such as ironing our shirts in a particular manner with the collar pressed flat, and were expected thereafter to have mastered that task.

'You've been told, you should know better!' was the reply when we did something less than perfectly.

Most of all, I liked the structure of recruit training. Each day I was learning something new, working by myself on my individual soldierly skills and at the same time learning to function as part of a team.

‘Squeeze the trigger, don’t pull it; remember your breathing,’ the instructor said to me later in the day as I adopted the standing unsupported position on the rifle range, holding my F88 Steyr rifle up into my shoulder with nothing to lean on or against. In those orders, I heard the echoes of my grandfather’s lessons on shooting almost word for word. Many of my fellow recruits had never handled a firearm prior to enlisting, but Grandad had taught me well.

The automated target was moving across my front and I aimed and squeezed, just as I’d been taught, the 5.56-millimetre rounds giving me kicks in the shoulder that were as familiar as an old mate giving you a playful punch on the arm.

‘Safety catch to safe, unload!’ the instructor ordered after I’d finished shooting. He inspected my rifle, to make sure it was empty, and together we went forward to inspect the target.

‘Five out of five, Keighran. You’ve got to be happy with that, especially from the standing unsupported position.’

Compliments were few and far between during recruit training, so I swelled with a little pride. ‘That’s the only way I’ve ever shot,’ I told him, ‘at moving targets.’

I already knew I was going to the infantry when I finished recruit training – failure was not an option for me. After I’d been accepted for enlistment, I had made enquiries about training as a helicopter mechanic, but to apply for that or any other trade would have meant waiting for a future recruit course as the available slots for those jobs had already been taken and tended to be given to people who were a bit older than me. The infantry, it seemed, was always after people, even seventeen year olds, and by ticking that box I’d been assured a place on the next intake.

Many of my instructors had already been to East Timor, where Australia’s peacekeeping deployment was continuing, and one of them gave a presentation about his time there one afternoon. I went into the lecture hall with the other recruits, removed my hat and sat to attention until told to sit easy.

The corporal had a PowerPoint presentation and as I saw images of soldiers piling out of Black Hawk helicopters or driving through jungle hills or past burned-out homes in six-wheel-drive Land Rovers, I realised that there was much more ahead for me to learn and experience.

Back in the lines at the end of the day, we found that the mail had been delivered. The married guy who had been down that morning was wearing a big smile as he ripped open a care package from his wife and kids and other recruits were laughing and joking about love letters, real and imagined. I lay on my back, staring at the ceiling and taking advantage of a rare break. There was no mail for me, but gushing words from a loved one seemed to me to be a bit like a mobile phone – how could you miss something you had never had?

After eighty days, it was over. Polished, starched and fit, with backs straight and chins tucked, we marched out and when we were dismissed from the parade ground, my fellow recruits were embraced by wives, girlfriends, husbands, boyfriends, sisters, brothers, kids and anyone else who cared about them and was proud of them.

There was no-one there for me. It wasn't a surprise, as my parents had neither the means nor inclination to travel to another state. It didn't get me down, as I was used to being alone and taking care of myself.

I didn't realise it at the time, but where I was headed, I would meet people who would become so close to me that our connection would be stronger than blood or any words on a piece of paper could ever be.

*

'I'm gonna teach you how to set up an ambush.' The corporal addressing us was older than some of the other instructors at the School of Infantry, and he'd served in Rwanda and Somalia, places where the bullets had been flying.

'Essentially,' his eyes narrowed as he smiled, 'it's a licence to kill cunts.'

Infantry IET – initial employment training – at Singleton, in the otherwise picturesque wine-growing country of the New South Wales

Hunter Valley, brought a massive shift in thinking for those of us who had elected to become infantry soldiers. Here there was little or no lip-service given to political correctness, and it was clear we were here to learn one big, important lesson – how to kill.

‘There’s no other way to describe what an ambush is,’ the corporal went on as he gestured to the Claymore anti-personnel mine sitting on four spindly legs in front of us, the ominous words ‘Front Towards Enemy’ facing us. ‘You set it up, people come, and you kill them.’

Kapooka, which many recruits had found confronting, was touchy-feely compared to the School of Infantry.

‘We are here to create war fighters,’ the officer had said in his opening address to us, ‘and to give you the skills you need to do your job.’

That job, as I had read and was now learning, was to seek out and close with the enemy and to kill or capture them.

I had been given a week of leave after Kapooka and I had spent most of it with Grandad, fishing, apart from a trip to Miriam Vale, one of the towns in the education department cluster that included Rosedale State School, where I received a belated award for my sporting achievements while I was still at school. The organisers had found out that I had enlisted in the army and asked me to give a talk on my experiences so far.

It was the first time I had ever spoken in public and the crowd of schoolkids and parents were sweating and fanning themselves under the burning late summer sun, so I kept it short.

‘There is more to life than this,’ I said, spreading my hands wide, incorporating the country town and the bush on its fringes. ‘You don’t have to stay on the farm.’

I called in briefly at Lowmead, but as usual I felt more at home on the river with Grandad.

‘They still call your mess tins *dixies*?’ Grandad asked me.

‘Yes. And the metal cup that goes on the water bottle –’

‘Cups, canteen, steel,’ he said with a grin.

‘Yep,’ I said. More than sixty years after he had served in the army, while there had been a lot of progress in some areas, some things were exactly the same.

The same thought crossed my mind as I crouched, wearing a combat helmet, in the walled-off standing bay on the hand grenade range at Singleton a couple of weeks later. So much had changed in the defence force and warfare, but the business of closing with the enemy – shooting and throwing grenades – had stayed pretty much the same since World War I.

At 375 grams, the hand grenade was heavier than I thought it would be. ‘If you drop this fucking grenade, you’ll be doing extra duties for the rest of your life, if you live that is,’ the instructor said. He pointed at the pockmarks in the bricks, which I only then noticed. Someone, some time, had done just that, dropped a grenade in here, and it had gone off.

Holy shit, I thought to myself. I had enough explosives in my hand to kill a number of people. It was hard not to be nervous, concentrating so hard to remember all that I had been taught. I held the steel orb in my right hand and pulled out the pin with my left index finger – it takes more strength than people imagine and is definitely not best done with the teeth, like in the movies.

I stood, drew back my right arm and yelled, ‘Grenade!’ as I threw it. The instructor had hold of me by the back of the collar of my camouflage shirt and it was his job to make sure that I stood there until I could definitely see where the grenade had landed. If it was a dud and didn’t go off, I would be required to pinpoint where it was so the Explosive Ordnance Disposal guys could go out there and blow it up in place. It seemed like an age before I felt the downward tug on my collar that told me I could at last crouch down behind the brick wall. The grenade exploded with a bang and a thump that I could feel in my gut.

Our training moved on to increasingly deadly means of killing people and destroying shit.

The instructor held up a green plastic tube that he clicked and then pulled on to reveal a telescoping section, doubling its length. ‘This is the 66-millimetre M72 light anti-armour weapon, known to us in the Australian Army as the 66.’

We looked to each other and grinned. The 66 was a kind of disposable, one-shot bazooka, which came complete with a preloaded, rocket-fuelled high explosive anti-tank round. While we might not ever face armoured vehicles, this, we were told, was a good weapon for busting bunkers or taking out other fixed enemy positions.

After learning the drills, it was my turn to fire one. I extended the weapon and held the elongated tube up on my right shoulder. I checked behind me to make sure there was no-one there – they would be killed or burned by the back blast – then yelled, ‘66 firing!’

I pressed down on the rubber switch and there was a click and a thud as the rocket leapt away. I felt a shock wave blast through my skull and my eyes started blinking rapidly from the unexpected change in pressure around me, as I watched the round fly downrange. I was expecting an explosion of atomic proportions, a ball of flame and a mushroom cloud, like in the movies, but it was more like a spark and bang, with a small puff of dust as it detonated.

The world of make-believe has given people the wrong impression of warfare. Billowing explosions, still-intact bodies flying through the air and black-orange fireballs are the stuff of Hollywood. In reality, death comes easy, efficiently, and with no fanfare. One minute a good friend is standing, talking, laughing or running beside you, the next he is gone.

I might have only been seventeen and not the strongest man in the platoon, but my hands and body had been conditioned by years of hard labour on the farm. When it came to learning how to prepare a defensive position and erect barbed-wire fences, I was streets ahead of the city boys.

‘Where’d you learn to tie up a wire fence like that?’ an instructor asked me as I finishing nipping up a strand of wire.

‘I’ve been building fences since I was eleven, Corporal.’

The final phase of infantry IET was a week-long patrol exercise where we were pushed to our limits. The last three days we went without sleep. I had never been tested that long. To go seventy-two hours without closing your eyes is like being drunk. At one point, my section was in a defensive position and I was put out as a scout, or early warning sentry. I was hallucinating, thinking I was seeing movement when I wasn't.

'Dan, Dan, are you awake, mate?' one of the guys asked. He had come out to relieve me.

I was sitting with my back against a tree and he told me later that my eyes were wide open – I was not asleep – but that I looked through him like he was invisible. I remember looking up and not having any idea where I was or who I was, but of somehow being conscious that there was a rifle lying across my lap.

It is impossible to hide who you are as a person when you haven't had food or sleep for a number of days. People who take shortcuts, people who are not team players, people who don't maintain the standard expected will be revealed at times like these. And cutting corners can cause the loss of life in an operational situation.

We would take turns at being in charge of our ten-man section, and one of the ways to bend the rules was to post one-man pickets at night. According to Australian Army doctrine, there should always be two soldiers manning the section's machine gun throughout the hours of darkness – that's so one guy can make sure the other is alert, and can raise the alarm if something happens, without abandoning the gun.

One of the guys suggested that by doing up a roster of one-man pickets, we could all get a bit more sleep. I was like: 'Come on, that's not what we do, right?' I was pretty sure that I could last through a shift without falling asleep, but I wasn't sure that some of the other, older, guys in the section could be trusted not to doze off.

Having said that, they were a good bunch of guys in my team. Everyone looked after each other. We knew that we were being broken down and rebuilt, harder and tougher than during recruit training, and we were there to make sure that all of us, or as many as possible, passed our IET course.

I was a good soldier, but not an awesome one. I had my weaknesses and the training exposed them. At the end of the final week and after our three sleepless nights we carried out an attack that purposely ended in a fighting withdrawal.

‘Pick that man up, Private Keighran,’ a sergeant instructor barked at me, ‘he’s wounded.’

I hoisted one of my comrades into a fireman’s carry and staggered off, burdened not only with my pack, webbing and rifle, but now an extra eighty-odd kilograms of human being. I staggered through the bush, barely aware of my surroundings, totally fatigued, and when I was finally told I could lay the other man down, I saw we had arrived at the obstacle course.

Up and over walls, high-stepping through tyres, crawling under barbed wire with people yelling all around me, I struggled on like a toy robot with failing batteries. I came to the dreaded ropes, strung across the bearpit of filthy murky water. With my upper body strength still very much a work in progress, I took hold of a rope and tried to heave myself up. I couldn’t hold on to the rope, let alone lift myself. My hands, my arms, my legs, my whole body started cramping up. My body was shutting down on me, from not having eaten; I was completely depleted.

I felt like crying, not from pain, but from the thought that I might fail or that my weakness might let the rest of the team down. Through the fog that clouded my brain, I knew what happened when a trainee couldn’t use the ropes. I jumped into the pit of foul water, knowing that my punishment was to wade through it, like a crocodile, with only my eyes, nose and rifle above the waterline. The cramping continued and I flailed uselessly in the water, slipping under, the filthy water going up my nose.

You can will yourself to do so much, but when your ability to function is taken away from you, there is nothing you can do. All I could think was that I was not going to pass. I was really disappointed with myself – I had set myself high standards and this was the first time I hadn’t achieved them. My weapons drills were solid and I could remember what I’d been taught in the many theory lessons. This was the first time I really failed to make the grade.

As I struggled to the end of the bear pit and crawled out, coughing and retching water out of my lungs, I looked up at my corporal.

‘I’m sorry,’ I croaked.

He glared down at me, saying nothing. I was pissed off, my despair turning to anger.

‘I let the team down,’ I said, wiping my mouth. ‘Am I going to have to redo the course all over again?’

The corporal just gave a dismissive wave of his hand.

The other instructors had been urging their own sections onward and one of them, from a different platoon altogether, saw me lying there, cramping and drooling.

The other corporal crouched down and yelled at me: ‘Get up, you useless fucking retard!’

My corporal, who had wandered off to check on another student, strode back to where we were and butted in between us.

‘Fuck off,’ my corporal said to the other instructor in a quiet voice as they stood over me. He looked down at me. ‘Yelling at him isn’t going to help him now. He’s done enough to pass.’

EIGHT

‘Happy birthday, cunt,’ one of the other soldiers in my section said to me, rainwater beading on the green and brown camouflage paint on his face, his uniform stinking of sweat and the mouldy, mildewy smell of the rainforest, as he handed me a tin canteen cup of tea sweetened with condensed milk.

Some people mark their eighteenth birthday with a drunken party and wild dancing. I was sitting in the mud in pouring rain in the Shoalwater Bay training area, a snake- and mosquito-infested expanse of bushland in northern Queensland, and that cup of tea from one of the seven other soldiers in my section meant more to me than a hundred acquaintances and friends of friends slapping me on the back and getting me pissed.

Six months earlier, five other graduates of infantry IET and I had arrived by bus at Enoggera Barracks in Brisbane, the home of the 6th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment – 6 RAR for short – after finishing infantry training at Singleton. I’d had no say in which infantry battalion I would be posted to and while some people, supposedly in the know, claimed that 1 RAR, in Townsville, was the best of the best, some of the best soldiers in our course ended up on the same bus as me.

We reported to battalion headquarters, where we filled in reams of paperwork – the army loves forms – supplied by Yatesy, a gregarious clerk. We were ushered into the commanding officer’s office where the lieutenant colonel gave us a quick welcoming address full of officer stuff, about how we should work hard and not fuck up.

Back outside on the parade ground, the company sergeant majors – one from each of the battalion’s four companies – were waiting for us. The CSM position is an appointment held by the company’s senior non-commissioned officer, a warrant officer class two, or sergeant major. A company is led by an officer commanding (a major), with a captain as second-in-command and there are freshly minted young officers, lieutenants, in charge of the four platoons in a company. But the real top dogs with the meanest bite are always the CSMs.

'Let's have a look at you,' one of the warrant officers growled.

With that, each of the CSMs started taking turns at selecting new soldiers for his company. I couldn't believe it. It was like being back at school and picking sides for a game of footy. Like everyone else, I was thinking, *Please don't let me be last*.

About halfway through this modern-day slave auction, one of the sergeant majors stepped closer to me. 'Who's this lanky young fella?'

'Private Keighran, Sir,' I said, not knowing what else to say.

'You look alright. Delta Company.'

Once the selection was done, we were taken to our respective company headquarters and allocated our accommodation in the barracks on base, generally referred to as the lines. The rooms were like bat boxes or cells. Each narrow space in the three-storey besser-block building was just wide enough for a single bed. There were shared ablutions and the whole structure looked like it should have been demolished a hundred years ago. There was pigeon shit everywhere. Clearly, soldiers weren't expected to clean and polish every inch of these lines, like we had been at Kapooka. Still, it was a step up from my hayloft back in Lowmead.

In true army fashion, my ech bag, my kitbag with all my clothes, had not been loaded onto the bus I had arrived in, so I had to borrow some civvies for my first night in the boozer, the bar for other ranks – officers and senior non-commissioned officers had their own watering holes – on base. I showed up wearing a T-shirt and another guy's black dress pants. I was the immediate butt of plenty of jokes.

I was introduced to the other guys in my section and platoon. Private Knap, one of the senior soldiers, was a huge man, who looked like he was descended from Maori warriors. His arms were bigger than my thighs.

'I'm the beige man,' said another of the privates, Albert 'Tar' Finnsson, 'Not black, not white, but something in between.' I laughed at his casual reference to his mixed heritage.

All of the old hands had already served in East Timor the year before, in 1999, and even the privates had served at least four or five years. I was by far the youngest and least experienced. They seemed at ease with each other, confident and comfortable with their shared experiences and their jobs. Our intake of raw infantry soldiers was the first new blood in a couple of years.

At that time I was still too young to drink, so I had a few soft drinks and then went back to my room and sat on my squeaky single bed. The CSM had handed me two pages of photocopied information earlier that day. 'Learn this – you will be tested,' he had said in a menacing tone.

I read through the document. The closely spaced type contained a wealth of information about 6 RAR – its history, battle honours, the names of those who had lost their lives and the battalion's birthday. It was a lot to learn.

The next morning, on parade, the CSM was true to his word and fired questions at us new guys.

'Keighran, when was the 6th Battalion formed?'

'In 1965, Sir.'

He nodded his approval, then pointed, army-style with his whole hand, to another newbie. 'Battalion motto?'

'Duty first, Sir.'

'Good man.'

'When is Long Tan Day?' he asked another soldier.

That one was easy – 18 August. The first and most important thing I had learned about my battalion's history, in fact, Delta Company, my whole company's history, was that the unit I was now part of had been involved in Australia's most famous battle of the Vietnam War.

On 16 August 1966, during 6 RAR's first deployment to South Vietnam, the 1st Australian Task Force's base at Nui Dat was attacked by Viet Cong mortars and recoilless rifles. Bravo Company, 6 RAR, was sent out to find the attackers and was later relieved by Delta Company. On 18 August, Delta's 108 members walked into and engaged a regimental-sized force of Viet Cong thought to number 2500.

For several hours, during torrential rain, Delta Company slogged it out with the enemy. This was Australia’s largest single loss of life of the war, with seventeen members of 6 RAR killed in action. A troop of M113 armoured personnel carriers carrying Alpha Company was sent out to reinforce the beleaguered men of Delta and one of the armoured corps members was also killed. The extent of just what Delta Company had achieved, despite the loss of its own men, was not realised until the following day when the bodies of 245 enemy fighters were discovered. It was also believed that many more dead and wounded enemy had been carried away by their comrades.

So momentous was the Battle of Long Tan that ‘Long Tan Day’, 18 August, would later become officially recognised throughout Australia as Vietnam Veterans’ Day, a crucial part of the healing and commemorative process for the tens of thousands of Australians who served in what became a publicly unpopular war by its end. Those veterans had come home to a country that in many cases did not want to know about them, and it was only many years after the war that their service and sacrifice were honoured.

Even as a seventeen-year-old new member of Delta Company, I was issued with a small blue badge like a miniature swimming pool edged in gold – the United States Presidential Unit Citation, which President Lyndon B Johnson had awarded to Delta Company for extraordinary heroism at Long Tan. Ever since then, every member of the company has worn that award above the right breast pocket of their dress uniform. Not only my battalion, but also my company, was a part of Australian military history and that was something to be proud of.

After the parade, my section’s second-in-command, Lance Corporal Rome, took me aside and went through all of my field gear. We had been told we would be taking part in Exercise Tandem Thrust, one of the Australian Defence Force’s major exercises, after Anzac Day.

My kit was laid out on my bed. It was all of the stuff I had been issued with at Kapooka.

Rome picked up my folding hexamine stove. This was quite a fun little gadget, I thought, into which you put a hexamine tablet – like compressed kerosene – and lit it to boil water.

‘Hexi is fucking useless,’ he said. ‘Buy yourself a jetboiler, it uses cans of propane gas. You’ll be able to boil water for a brew in thirty seconds.’

‘Yes, Corp,’ I said, making a mental note.

I needn’t have bothered, because he took his hardcover army notebook out of his pocket and started making a list. ‘Your issue sleeping bag is shit – get yourself a proper Softie sleeping bag. These one-litre water bottles are useless for where we’re going, buy bigger ones. Your big pack is a fucking waste of time – go to the disposal store and buy an Alice pack.’

It was important to me not just to do as he had suggested and to fit in with everyone else, but to be professional in this new career that I’d taken on. I took his list into Brisbane and started shopping. It was just as well that as a seventeen year old I hadn’t been able to drink away my pay, because most of the money I’d managed to save since joining the army went into buying gear that was to replace much of the stuff the army had issued me for free! The Alice pack, the nickname for the American-designed LC-1 pack, was expensive. Pioneered by the American army in Vietnam, it incorporated an aluminium frame that kept the surface of the pack off your back – that was a good thing in hot weather, I was to learn, as it gave you some ventilation and stopped you sweating to death with a heavy load on your shoulders. With the little I had left, I bought myself a small television for my bat box room.

Not long after I marched into the battalion, we left Brisbane for northern Australia to take part in Exercise Tandem Thrust, which was an eye-opener for me. I encountered things that I’d so far only seen in recruiting brochures. There were tanks rumbling past us, paratroopers jumping out of aeroplanes and troops from other countries. It was exciting, but I basically had no clue what was going on. It was also a revelation to me about how the army actually worked outside of the artificial worlds of Kapooka and Singleton.

In recruit training, when someone says jump, you fucking jump, but things didn't always work that way in the battalion.

'They say we have to dig shell scrapes,' our corporal told us as we knelt around him in the bush, our faces camouflaged, uniforms already caked in dust that had turned to mud in the rain.

'Bullshit,' said one of the other members of the section.

'Why the fuck should we dig holes in the fucking ground?' muttered another. 'No-one's going to shell us here and no-one's going to bother checking on us.'

I was very familiar with shell scrapes – I'd dug many of them during recruit training and infantry IET at Singleton. To me, it was just something you did every time your section or platoon harboured up – set up for a night position – or stopped for an extended period. It was part of the training I had gone through, that you dug a shallow hole, about thirty to forty centimetres deep and as long as your body. The idea was that you would sleep in the shell scrape, and if you were shelled or mortared the shrapnel would pass over you, unless you took a direct hit.

'No way,' someone else said.

'Fuck it,' said the corporal. Democracy had won out and I was quite surprised.

Orders, it seemed, were not there to be blindly followed without question. I wondered where people would draw the line. Also, I was learning that the minimum standards that had been drilled into us and enforced in basic training were not necessarily being continued out in the real world, in the battalions and other units.

During Tandem Thrust, we had to do a forty-kilometre route march, carrying our rifles, webbing and packs. I had spent weeks, months, working on my fitness. I and the other new members of the battalion finished the march with energy to spare, but around us several other older, more experienced soldiers were dropping out, out of breath, exhausted and complaining of blisters.

The expectations I had of joining a fighting-fit, hardcore infantry battalion were rapidly being challenged. What I learned, of course, was that this was reality. The battalion was like any workplace in any company in the world: some of the people would be high achievers and on top of their game, while others would either coast, or be physically or mentally out of shape. Some were just getting old.

In training we had been pushed and held accountable every day, but in the bigger, real army I was learning that no amount of barking and yelling by senior NCOs or officers could make a soldier stay in shape and stay professional at their job. In training we were, in many ways, treated like children, but in the battalion we were adults and people had to be accountable to themselves as well as those in authority.

However, I was happy. I was still learning and still had so much ahead of me to learn, but I was finding that this job was suiting me. Grandad had told me that a stint in the infantry would help me work out what I wanted to do, but perhaps this *was* it.

Within the battalion itself, I discovered, were new goals I could set myself. The epitome of professionalism and professionals seemed to be in Support Company. With their distinctive black PT T-shirts, the members of the company were not elite, as such, but their specialised trades set them apart from the rest of us. Support Company was home to the snipers, reconnaissance or ‘recon’ platoon, the mortar platoon and DFSW – direct fire support weapons, such as heavy machine guns and anti-armour weapons. I decided I would apply for at least one of the courses to qualify me in one of these specialist roles.

6 RAR was a motorised infantry battalion, which meant we didn’t have to walk everywhere. On Exercise Tandem Thrust, we charged around the bush in specially converted six-wheel-drive Land Rovers. I got a turn at standing in the truck’s cupola, behind a machine gun on a ring mount. I didn’t really know what I was doing up there, but I was having fun pretending, as happy as a dog going for a drive with its head out the window in the breeze.

I was making new friends at the same time and learning about some of the characters in the battalion. One, Soldier X, was a walking shit fight.

‘Lend us some money, Dan,’ he said to me a few days after we got back to Enoggera. He looked tired, his eyes bloodshot and his pores exuding that familiar smell of old booze that I remembered from my father when he had a hangover.

‘Why, mate? It was just pay day the other day.’

He nodded. ‘Spent it all on strippers and booze. I took half my army kit to the pawn shop and they gave me a loan, but I’ve spent that as well. I need some cash to get my gear back in time for the next inspection.’

Soft touch that I was, I gave him some money so he could go and reclaim his gear. Of course, once he had his equipment back, the siren song of the bars and strip clubs of Brisbane was too much to ignore. Life was a vicious, if fun, cycle for Soldier X.

*

The jungle smelled of decay, rotting vegetation stewing in the heat and humidity.

‘Look,’ said one of the Malaysian soldiers we were training with. He pointed to what looked like fresh scratch marks in the dark bark of a tree. The wood under the bark glowed pale in the parallel gouges. ‘Tiger.’

‘What the fuck?’ I said. ‘A tiger?’

We were patrolling in the Malaysian jungle and, as we were on a training exercise, we only had blank ammunition in our rifles. I wondered what we would do if we were confronted by one of the big cats in the gloom under the triple canopy above us. There was a screeching noise nearby.

‘What was that?’ one of the guys asked.

‘Two monkeys rooting,’ said another.

‘Really?’

We laughed. The fact was that there was plenty of danger lurking in the jungle, even though we weren’t at war. There were snakes, bugs, massive scorpions and, apparently, tigers.

My first overseas trip with the army – my first ever – was to Malaysia on a four-month deployment to Rifle Company Butterworth. RCB was a longstanding commitment by the Australian Army to deploy a company at a time to the Butterworth air force base on the island of Penang. It was a chance for Australian soldiers to work in a different environment, and to have a bit of fun.

We flew to Malaysia in a RAAF C-130 Hercules transport aircraft, squeezed in like sardines. As we walked down the ramp on landing, a wave of Asian tropical heat engulfed us and the scent of perfumed flowers mixed with a hint of raw sewage filled our noses.

I'd had no idea where Malaysia even was. It was 2001 and I still had no internet connection – my first phone was an old Nokia brick, pre-smartphone – so I looked up the country in an atlas. I was becoming more comfortable in the battalion, and the trip to Malaysia was a big adventure as far as I was concerned. I couldn't have imagined any job around Lowmead, Rosedale or even Bundaberg that would have taken me somewhere so exotic at such a young age.

Our training in-country began with a survival course. We learned how to catch and eat frogs and crickets, and I found out you could actually eat a scorpion. We also had to strangle a chicken, which a couple of the city boys found distasteful, but which really didn't faze someone who had skinned kangaroos and sometimes shared his shower with a hanging steer's carcass. I learned that old Changi Anning was right, that sometimes boys from the bush could adapt to things easier than city kids.

We did a lot of live firing, which was the most realistic training I had done to date. We carried out section attacks while using live rounds and high-explosive shells were going off around us. We did ambush training – in the eerie darkness of the jungle at night, it somehow felt more real, more exciting than it had back in Singleton.

It rained often and when it did, it descended like a curtain, cutting out the light and drenching us in seconds. When a downpour passed, though, the air was fresh and clean again, for a time, before the leaden humidity and the ever-present odour of rot returned to the jungle. Out there, in the middle of nowhere, I had the feeling that I might have been the first human to walk down that tiger's trail.

We called Doctor Dan, the regimental medical officer, the Dick Doctor, as the male reproductive organ seemed to give him a lot of grief.

'Just be warned, men,' Doctor Dan said us as he delivered our first pre-leave lecture, 'the local population is riddled with sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. Triad gangs control prostitution in Penang, so be careful, and if you must indulge, use protection!'

Penang was also a live-fire assault on my senses. There were pretty girls smiling at us, sewage in open drains, spicy exotic foods sizzling over coal braziers outside, incense burning, seedy characters loitering in laneways and kids laughing at us.

Brisbane had been the first big city I'd ever seen, and Penang really rammed home to me what a sheltered life I had lived up until now.

'How the hell did I end up here?' I asked myself, smiling.

One of the guys hailed a trishaw and gave the driver fifty ringgit to swap places with him. The driver shrugged and got into the passenger seat and the digger challenged us all to a grand prix. Soon, all of us were flagging down trishaws and getting on the pedals. The race was on, with chickens scattering, bar girls laughing and nervous trishaw riders hanging on for dear life and shouting instructions – or abuse – as we headed the wrong way down a one-way street.

Everyone was drinking, me included as I had turned eighteen while on Tandem Thrust, and, predictably, there was trouble. One evening we were drinking at the Skippy Bar, an all-ranks boozer on the base, on the edge of the flight line. It seemed like a good idea at the time for those of us who had consumed a skinful of alcohol to do nudie runs up and down the flight line.

That was bad enough, but the shit hit the fan after a couple of guys snuck up to a RAAF F-111 bomber that was based there – our air force also maintained a presence at Butterworth – and spray-painted the battalion logo, a pair of army boots, and the word 'Boom' on the side of the aircraft.

The bar got shut down and our section would have been grounded if something bigger hadn't done the job for us. We were at Butterworth air force base on 11 September 2001, when terrorists hijacked civilian airliners in the United States and flew them into the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon. The whole base went into lockdown.

Our section had the day off and we were relaxing in our air-conditioned rooms in the evening when the runner, one of the soldiers on duty, came to us, almost out of breath. ‘Come to CHQ. Now!’ Company Headquarters was on the edge of the flight line, not far from the infamous Skippy Bar.

The rest of the company was seated around tables outside the bar, which was closed, watching the television. As I sat, I saw a replay of one of the aircraft hitting one of the Twin Towers.

The company commander, a major, addressed us. ‘All leave’s cancelled until further notice. And I want everyone not on base back here, now. While Malaysia’s friendly, it’s a Muslim country and I want us ready for anything.’

Until then, we had been able to go off base and into town by ourselves after hours, but now we were confined to the base. What had been a fun trip, up until now, suddenly turned serious.

Holy shit, we’re all going to war, I thought to myself.

When the major had finished, the guys were all talking among themselves, speculating.

‘We’re going to get called to go and do something about this, for sure,’ someone said.

‘Fucking oath,’ another replied.

‘We’re totally justified in responding to this sort of shit.’

Mixed with surprise and shock, as we watched the replays of the attacks over and over on the news, day after day, was an undercurrent of excitement. We had trained to fight an armed aggressor and Al-Qaeda, the organisation that claimed responsibility for the attacks, was a new enemy for a new millennium.

The news was also reporting that Prime Minister John Howard had been in the United States at the time of the attacks and there seemed little doubt that Australia would be part of the armed response that America was planning to the terrorists’ acts.

After the initial flurry of excitement, we went back to killing time in Malaysia, and took a side trip to Thailand for some R and R. Delta Company had its 2001 Christmas party in a Thai whorehouse.

Whoever booked the place thought it was a function area, but it turned out that the all-purpose ‘venue’ was sandwiched between a proper hotel on one side and an actual brothel on the other. We were in a kind of no-man’s-land, which seemed to be ceded to whichever establishment had the most business. It became apparent which way the fortunes were ebbing as more and more attractive scantily clad young women started crashing our party.

This not unwelcome wave of female reinforcements continued and there were few objections. Once more, I felt like the country boy I was, thrust into a big wide world that seemed to have new adventures and experiences at every turn.

By the time we returned to Australia, in December 2001, Australia had, indeed, gone to war, but instead of sending an infantry battalion, the government had elected to send a Special Air Service (SAS) squadron to Afghanistan to help with the hunt for Osama Bin Laden, a naval task force to the Persian Gulf and air-to-air refuelling aircraft to support coalition air strikes in Afghanistan.

Massive changes were taking place back in Australia, with the defence force moving to a war footing. Security at our base at Enoggera, in Brisbane, had always been pretty lax and we could even go on and off base without showing our military ID cards, but all that changed. There were barricades at the gate in case of suicide attacks and even the holes in the perimeter fence had been fixed!

I was stretching my wings more, as an adult, and moved off base after a while into an apartment at Enoggera with fellow soldiers Tar Finnsson and Keith O’Toole. Later, I moved into a shared house with Matt Johns, one of the other guys from the battalion and a procession of other people, at Albany Creek. That was a party house, with the cops visiting regularly, but Johns and I kept things relatively under control as we had to get up early for work every weekday morning.

The world had changed, overnight, and so had the military. Since Vietnam, the most our military had done was to contribute to peacekeeping operations, but now there was a real war going on and even though the government had only committed Special Forces in a ground role, we still had the feeling in the battalion that we were going to be a part of this war some time.

It’s said that an army always trains to fight its last war, and for us that had been Vietnam, with an emphasis on jungle warfare, but now we were going to have to learn to fight in the desert, and among people, civilians, who might be hostile to us.

NINE

It had been raining all day as we patrolled through the jungle, but this time we were carrying live ammunition in our weapons and pouches. We emerged from the dense rainforest and came to a village. A gap-toothed old man came out of his house and smiled and waved to us.

The people of East Timor were pleased to see us. They had ceded from Indonesia and suffered at the hands of pro-Jakarta militias, but it was 2003 and the rioting and fighting, including occasional contacts between Australian forces and the militia, had died down.

Our mission was to be there, to keep the peace, and, through our presence, stop the militias from returning. Our tactics involved patrolling through the jungle in search of militia hide-outs and maintaining a high profile in populated areas, to reassure the locals they were safe.

The old man beckoned to us, to come into his house and take shelter from the pouring rain.

‘Holy shit, these people live in the stone age,’ one of the diggers, Marcus Randall, muttered out the side of his mouth as we entered the man’s home. I was no longer the new guy in the unit and I had made friends with a couple of the more recent arrivals, including Marcus and a guy named Matt Hutton.

In true Australian Army tradition, where everyone has a nickname, or their surname shortened, Marcus and Matt were known as Rando and Hutto. I was the odd one out, as it seemed impossible to shorten Keighran, and our platoon sergeant even had trouble pronouncing that. Hutto and Rando would snicker as each day the sergeant tried a different version of my name when calling the roll – I got Kerrigan, Keegaran, Kegan and many other variations. Unusually, I ended up being known simply as ‘Dan’ to everyone, from the commanding officer down.

To me, the simple but clean brick and tile Timorese houses, which borrowed from the influence of the Portuguese – who had run East Timor as their colony until Indonesia invaded in 1975 – looked pretty good, compared to where I grew up. The people were poor, but they tended their gardens and had a sense of pride.

In Dili, the capital, and other towns, things were a bit looser, with many buildings still bearing the pockmarks, charred rafters and blackened walls from the early battles, fires and riots. Livestock roamed free everywhere – ducks and sheep cruising the streets – and there was rubbish all around. People had been raped and killed here and the smell of open drains was similar to Malaysia, but with an undertone of something worse. When we arrived in East Timor, we had cruised through the city in the back of a Unimog truck with the canvas sides rolled up and some of the guys had dry-retched from the odour. Infrastructure was still a mess and it wasn’t unusual to see people tapping into the spaghetti forests of low-hanging powerlines to try to reconnect to the grid.

We chatted for a while to the old man and a few other people in the village, then headed out into some rice paddies. The secco, the section commander, gave us the signal to harbour up, as it was getting dark. The rain was still falling steadily. There was nowhere to put up a hutchie and a bivvy bag, and a waterproof Gore-Tex outer for a sleeping bag would have just floated away. Soldier X and I sat down on a mud dyke in the middle of a flooded field back to back, supporting each other in the way that infantrymen do, so that we could keep watch all around, and because we were too fucked to attempt a more comfortable set-up.

I closed my eyes, hoping for the impossible, that I might be able to sleep like this. I was certainly exhausted. With my Minimi light machine gun, water, ammunition for my own weapon and 40-millimetre grenades for the section’s M203 grenade launcher, rations and all the other shit we were expected to carry, my pack weighed between seventy and seventy-five kilograms, the same weight as me at the time.

Soldier X had been doing it tough during the day and at one point, when the sun beat down on us during a rare break in the rain, he had collapsed under the burden of his gear. We tipped water over him and made him drink. He had heat stroke.

Now, as we sat in the rain, I caught the sight of movement. Scorpions were emerging from holes in the mud bank around us. I brushed one off my leg. I couldn't believe this place.

'I've had enough of this shit, I'm leaving,' Soldier X said, as he tried to crush a scorpion into the mud with his boot.

'Why did you join, X?' I asked him.

'Fucked if I know.'

In the nearly two years that I'd been in the army, I had continued to learn things. I had been on a mortar course, but so far was still in Delta Company, and we had gone through a series of mission rehearsal exercises in preparation for our deployment to Timor. While the action had died down in the fledgling country, we were still considered to be on warlike service. I was also starting to learn about leadership and the different techniques people could use to get others to do things they probably did not want to do or would not do if they were in a 'normal' environment.

Leadership, it seemed to me, was knowing how to manipulate people.

Of course, it was also about communication and setting an example. Australian soldiers want and deserve to know why they are being asked to do something, and they expect their leaders to be able to pitch in and endure the same hardships.

I was changing. I was no longer the new recruit, surprised and a little judgemental that not everyone in the battalion could complete a forty-kilometre route march, and that sometimes people questioned orders that seemed stupid or without basis. I was growing up and I was starting to challenge things.

At the beginning of our first patrol in East Timor, our platoon commander, Lieutenant Brock, had announced that he was going to break us in.

We went out for two weeks, slogging through thick jungle infested with lantana, which hooked into our skin and gear and slowed us to crawling pace. The terrain went from undulating to steep cliffs and ravines. I remember our secco getting on the radio to give a sitrep – a situation report – back to headquarters.

'You've only travelled 500 metres in two hours,' the clearly frustrated company commander replied on the radio.

'There's no way we're making that next RV,' the secco said, checking the rendezvous point's grid reference on the map. 'I don't think you understand what the going's like, over.'

'You *will* make it,' the major replied.

'Not a chance,' my secco fired back. 'You're not on the ground and I'm telling you we need a time extension – or a helicopter.'

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Brock had his own problems; he went down with kidney stones and had to be medically evacuated, while we inched our way to the border between East Timor and the Indonesian side of the island, breaking ourselves in, in our platoon commander's absence. There, our job was to set up roadblocks and check locals who might be smuggling contraband or weapons.

At the border we met an Australian police officer who was in-country as part of the United Nations contingent, working with the local law enforcement people who were just starting to get their act together. He looked us up and down, sweating under the weight of our big packs, and festooned with enough weapons and ammunition to start a small war, let alone keep the peace.

'You don't need all that shit here,' he said, gesturing to my Minimi. He patted the nine-millimetre pistol he wore in a holster on his right leg. 'This is all you need.'

'Yeah, we've gathered that,' I said, bending down to shift the weight of my Alice pack.

It was true, we did feel overdressed for the job. I wondered what would have happened if we had got into a contact with some lightly armed, ragtag militia. How would we have been able to pursue them through the jungle, or break contact, burdened as we were? *We're not thinking smart here*, I thought to myself.

My knees and back were hurting – everything was hurting – and when I took a piss it came out gluey and brown. Yellow urine is a combat indicator of dehydration, but we were getting beyond that in the humidity and heat of Timor.

As a private, a lowly rifleman in the battalion, there was little I could do to change things, but I could analyse what we were doing and how we were doing it, so that if I was ever in a position of leadership I might be able to do a better job.

As I sat on the muddy paddy dyke, scorpions crawling around and over me, a despondent Soldier X leaning wearily against my back, I realised two things. First, I was thinking the same thing as X, right then, that this patrol was bullshit, especially sitting out in a paddy field in the rain when we could be enjoying the hospitality of the locals and still keeping them safe. The second thing I realised was that it wouldn't help either of us for me to join him in his moaning.

I wiped the rain from my face. 'You're part of a team, X.'

He grunted back at me. I was thinking out loud, working through my own thoughts, reassuring myself as much as trying to raise his morale. 'There are seven other guys doing the same job as you in this section.'

He settled into the mud, but he wasn't talking back at me, so I went on: 'I get it that you're doing it tough and not well, but we'll be back at base tomorrow and you'll get a brew and sleep in a bed.'

I wasn't looking at him, as we were back to back, but I think I sensed him nod, in the rain. 'No-one will leave you behind and, besides, there's nowhere you can go. Everyone else is going to stay here and do the job. We're all in this together and we look after each other.'

As I heard the words coming out of my mouth, I realised again they were as much for my benefit as they were for his.

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There would be times later in my career when it seemed like I never stopped moving, never slept, but East Timor was proof of something most soldiers experience after some time on operations: that boredom can sometimes be a bigger enemy than someone shooting at you.

We would set up OPs (observation posts) on the border to watch for suspicious activity. We did see, on a few occasions, people scurrying about, but we had no mandate to open fire on them or arrest them just because they were sneaking around.

On the plus side, we had access to gear that we had never used before, such as thermal weapon sights. These were still something of a novelty in the Australian Army at the time, reserved for people in warlike situations, even if no-one was shooting at us. Frankly, no militia would have dared take us on – we were armed to the fucking teeth with so many weapons and so much ammo.

During the days, we went to the range and qualified on nine-millimetre pistols and other weapons systems we had only seen before, and never fired. It rained most days and in between resting I did push-ups and heaves, still working on my upper body strength, to stave off the monotony.

Even, or especially, when nothing was happening, I felt like I was testing myself and learning more about myself all the time. While the threat was low, we still had to keep security in mind. Later in the tour, we felt safe enough to venture into the local village, to buy souvenirs or to kick a soccer ball around with the local kids, but we always went in a group of at least three, to look out for each other.

It was interesting, too, working with soldiers from different countries. There were Fijians based near us and they had an entirely different approach to the job. Whereas we would go out armed to the teeth in case something happened, the Fijian soldiers had embraced the low-threat situation and usually only travelled with an M16 rifle and no other gear. They seemed more at home than us, in a culture that was perhaps not too different from their own. They bought most of their fresh rations in the villages, eating what the locals did, and some of them even had local girlfriends. I liked them; despite what some people might have perceived as laxness, they were good soldiers, with a can-do attitude. Talking to them, many of them had been called out to deal with riots in their own country, so what had gone down in East Timor was not a million miles away from their own experiences at home.

Any variation in the daily routine of sleeping, working out, patrolling and manning OPs was welcome. Word came down that our section could take a helicopter flight to the town of Oecusse. Excited, we reported to a helipad near our base. The chopper came in; it was a Russian machine, painted white with big black United Nations letters on the side. As the engines wound down, we approached and were greeted by the Russian crew.

We looked around the unfamiliar machine and I saw an empty vodka bottle sitting in the back.

‘Okay,’ said the pilot, overweight and unshaven, with a thick accent, ‘now we do safety brief.’

We dutifully clustered around him, ready to learn about the emergency procedures, exits, etc.

‘If we crash, we die. Everyone okay with that? Thumbs up?’

There was a moment’s silence, then we realised that was it, and started laughing.

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Along with boredom, we had to learn to deal with each other. We had worked well as a section and a platoon on exercises, but now we were living in each other’s pockets, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, with virtually no breaks. With the daily rain showers, the whole platoon of thirty guys was often cooped up together.

During our spells in barracks, we could work-out in the gym. As Hutto liked to joke, we had worked on our fitness before coming to East Timor in order to be fit enough to deploy, but on deployment we were getting in shape to meet girls when we got home.

Rando, Hutto and I were all becoming good mates. Rando – Marcus – was the golden boy, excelling at everything he did even as a digger, and a good dependable friend. Matt Hutton, too, was a bloke who would stand up for his mates first and ask questions later. With a jaw carved of rock and broad shoulders, Hutto was also known as the Italian Stallion because of his Mediterranean complexion and Rocky-like love of boxing.

One day, Hutto and I were working out with the heavy punching bag, Hutto holding it for me while I laid into it. ‘You know what you’re doing here, mate,’ Hutto said, giving me a nod for my technique as I finished off.

I started taking off the boxing gloves. ‘I learned how to fight from my dad.’

‘That’s good,’ Hutto said.

I shook my head. ‘Not in a good way.’

Hutto came from a big family. He liked to talk about them, and I’d met a few of them, but even though we were close, he knew not to press me about my childhood. I had too many memories of my father getting into fights; of him getting into drunken, threatening arguments with Mum; and even of little Jacqui punching him in the nose when he went after my mother. It was safer for me to talk about my grandparents, and all the boys knew how close I was to them, especially Grandad.

We were sent out to Batugade, on the coast, for a while, to an old base that was in the process of being decommissioned. There were guys from 7 Section, 12 Platoon there, and they did a two-day handover with us. During the changeover period, we did pickets with their guys, at the front gate, overlooking the beach.

Soldier X had been running true to form, stuffing up and complaining to anyone who would listen, even the guys from the other section. One night I was on picket with Matt Johns from 7 Section and he started laying into Soldier X, complaining about him, going on and on about what a useless soldier he was.

I couldn’t take any more. I told him to shut up, and when he didn’t, I gave him a punch on the jaw, hard enough for him to get the message. I thought about how on my infantry IET course, my corporal had stepped in when the other instructor had started abusing me for not being able to complete the rope obstacle course. Soldier X was a screw-up, but he was ‘our’ screw-up and no-one else was allowed to badmouth a member of our family. We didn’t look out for each other necessarily because we were all best of mates, but because we were all in this together.

At that time, few of us had access to smartphones or laptops or other digital technology and, in any case, there was no internet connectivity. To occupy our downtime, we played cards or read books or played board games. I remember one guy freaking out over losing at the strategy game, ‘Risk’.

Things changed on later deployments, when everyone took their own personal entertainment with them; as a result, we lost some of that sense of community, where we would talk more, even if we sometimes annoyed the hell out of each other.

About the only other distraction in East Timor was Christmas. Most days, we were out patrolling or doing security, but on Christmas Day we sat down to lunch, wearing party hats. We were allowed two beers each and the Australian Army Band had come from Australia to play for us.

By the time the deployment was coming to an end, we were all ready to get home. I just wanted to be out of there, as soon as possible, though there was the inevitable admin and briefings to go through. All of us were given a debrief by an army psychologist.

I walked into a tent and sat down in front of a female psych officer.

‘What are you going to do when you get back home?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know.’

‘No family waiting for you, friends to catch up with?’

I shook my head. All my friends, now, were here and they were all looking forward to getting back to their lives.

She consulted the piece of paper in front of her, on which she was making notes, then looked up at me again. ‘Anything troubling you?’

Aside from a weird fungal growth on my foot? ‘No.’

Outside, one of the guys asked me how it went.

I shrugged. ‘What did you say when she asked you what you’re going to do when you get home?’

He grinned. ‘I said I’ll go out and find trouble.’

Back home in Australia, we were awarded our medals at a parade. We received the Australian Service Medal (ASM) and the United Nations medal. The men and women on the rotation before us had received the AASM, the Australian Active Service Medal, but the government had taken the view that as the mission in Timor had changed from an intervention force to a straightforward United Nations peacekeeping operation while we were there, we would receive the ASM. I was no longer the youngest, least experienced person in the battalion and I had ended up with a couple of medals for going on one deployment. It was a big deal for me.

At the end of the parade, we were dismissed and, as at Kapooka, everyone seemed to be falling into the arms of someone. As usual, there was no-one waiting for me. It wasn’t surprising as I hadn’t even told my mother that I was going to Timor.

Of course, it wasn’t all happy families for all the guys who returned. One got home to find that his wife had left him and had taken all the furniture and all the money in the joint bank account. On TV, the Australian public is shown footage of soldiers returning home to loving partners and families – they’re never shown the fallout when someone’s spouse has been cheating and decided she or he has had enough of being married to a military person.

I heard one story, possibly an urban legend, that after one deployment to Timor a guy returned home to a big surprise. His wife was still at home – but she had used his army pay to put in a swimming pool.

He grabbed two handfuls of his own hair. ‘You’ve done what?’

‘I’ve put in a pool, in the backyard.’

‘It’s not our bloody house,’ he replied.

‘It isn’t?’ asked his young wife, surprised.

‘No, it’s owned by bloody Defence Housing!’

You truly get to know people when you’re deployed on operations with each other and spending all your waking and sleeping hours with them. I reckon I knew more about my mates at the end of that first tour of Timor than some of their wives or girlfriends knew about them. You get to know so much about a person that you run out of things to talk about – that only happens after decades of marriage.

Some of these guys knew everything about me and my crazy upbringing, but they didn’t know their wife was unhappy, or that they were about to get a new swimming pool.

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After East Timor, the battalion went back to its usual round of exercises and training and in 2004 we once more deployed to Rifle Company Butterworth in Malaysia.

Post-September 11, there was an intensified interest in Islamic extremism around the world and during that trip we went to Thailand to train the Thai army, which for some time had been fighting a low-level counterinsurgency war against extremists in their southern border provinces.

We took the training seriously, and so did the Thais. Many of these guys had been in combat and were about to be back out into the fray, where they had already taken casualties. Even though we weren’t there in a warlike role, in many ways I found this exercise more rewarding than the operation in Timor we had just completed. The work was probably more important, and our new friends were in an actual shooting war that the rest of the world knew little about.

The Thai soldiers were excellent in the jungle, where their knowledge of the land and its inherent dangers was obvious. While their innate individual skills were very good, they lacked equipment, technology and reliable logistics.

At first, I wondered what a bunch of young Aussies could offer soldiers who had been in real combat, but it soon became very apparent that the training I had received in the Australian Army already was world class. It was a revelation to find that the skills I had taken for granted were not readily taught in this neighbouring country.

For example, none of the Thais had been trained to use hand grenades, so this was something where all of us could pass on our knowledge of the proper way to use them. I remembered my own nervous introduction to handheld explosives and could relate to how the Thais took to the training.

In our ranks were a couple of ex-armoured corps guys who could show the Thais how to do routine maintenance on their armoured personnel carriers and show them how to strip, assemble and clean the .50-calibre machine guns fitted to the vehicles. These experiences made me realise the army had probably spent tens of thousands of dollars on training me alone.

For our leave during this deployment, we took a civilian flight to Vietnam. Everyone in 6 RAR, and especially those of us in Delta Company, knew of the battalion's legendary service during the war in South Vietnam, especially that first tour, in 1966, during which the bloody Battle of Long Tan took place.

We landed in Ho Chi Minh City, formerly known as Saigon and, as I learned, still called that by many locals, who had cultivated an air of separation from the north of the country, where communism had originated. Saigon was like other parts of Asia I had already visited, but with a certain orderliness to it. The streets were clean and everyone went about life with a brisk, busy air, as if making money and doing business were more important than the ideologies over which the war had been fought.

As Australians, we were given a friendly welcome by everyone we met; there seemed to be no residual animosity from the war days. We wanted to visit Long Tan, which was quite a trip from the city, but we soon realised that because of our jobs we would need special permissions and security clearances, so that was off the agenda.

Instead, we went in search of fun. We travelled to Cu Chi, a popular tourist destination set near a former American military base in an area that was honeycombed with underground tunnels used by the Viet Cong.

We took turns at crawling through a tunnel which seemed tiny and claustrophobic but, as it happened, had been enlarged to accommodate westerners. Above ground, there were displays of booby traps – grenades rigged with trip-wires, and ‘punji’ pits filled with sharpened bamboo stakes. The points of the stakes used to be smeared with faeces, our guide told us, to cause infections. It made me realise that an enemy didn’t need advanced modern technology to cause mayhem on the field of battle.

We ended up on a firing range, where tourists could pay to fire AK-47s, American M16s and, if you had enough dough, an RPG-7 rocket-propelled grenade. I had been brought up on strict safety protocols for handling weapons, starting with my grandad and then later in the army. Our tour guide took a couple of 5.56-millimetre rounds and stuck them in his ears for hearing protection – that was as far as safety went on this range!

I had a go with an AK. It was a sturdy weapon, famed for being able to be dragged through the jungle mud and still being able to fire. It pulled high and to the right, but it was fun to be shooting and having a laugh and a couple of cold beers at the same time.

‘This country is amazing,’ said one of the newer guys in the company, Barnsey, grinning as he let off another burst of automatic fire. ‘Best place ever.’

After the shoot we went to the War Remnants Museum in Saigon, a sobering collection not only of arms, vehicles and aircraft, but also of the terrible legacies of the war. There were exhibitions showing the effect of napalm on civilians and foetuses who had been deformed by the Americans’ use of Agent Orange, defoliants sprayed from the air to denude jungle trees of their leaves, making it easier to spot Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers moving on foot. Australian soldiers and their children had also suffered from the effects of these chemicals.

It was confronting.

‘Jeez, you wouldn’t get away with something this shocking in Australia,’ Barnsey said.

Back on the street, a young Vietnamese guy on a moped pulled up next to us. He looked furtively from side to side and lowered his voice. ‘You want drugs?’

‘Don’t they have the death penalty here for selling drugs?’ I asked him.

He nodded vigorously. ‘Yes, yes.’

‘Right,’ I said, ‘so you want me to buy drugs from you and then you’ll set me up?’

He shook his head but gunned the moped and sped off.

I ended up talking to another guy on motorcycle who offered to be my personal guide, and I decided to take a chance on him. It was a good investment as over the next few days he was my personal chauffeur and bodyguard, taking me to tourist attractions, clubs, internet cafes and restaurants. I paid him $200, probably more than he earned in a month, but I was making what I considered good money and I figured it was a small price to pay to help him out and to make sure I didn’t get ripped off or fucked over.

I was drinking more now that I had more disposable income and I found that tequila helped me negotiate Saigon’s chaotic night-time traffic. We were out drinking one night, and when it was time to leave one of the nightclubs, we decided to do a final shot. The drinks came and when we were done, we slammed the glasses down on the bar.

‘On three!’ I said to the others. On the count of three, we strode out of the bar and straight into the mass of traffic. We walked, purposefully, not changing pace, and the traffic alternately slowed or sped up to accommodate the drunken soldiers.

I had booked into a five-star hotel and once I was back in my room, I went out onto my balcony to try to clear my head. Bright lights stretched all the way to the horizon. Cars honked and the sound of music wafted up from this fun, vibrant city that had once seen running battles in its streets.

I had money to spend and some leftover to save and I was enjoying myself in the company of good friends in exotic lands. I drank in the sights, sounds and smells, imprinting them on my memory and wondered how I had got here.

I smiled and said to myself, ‘Thanks, Grandad.’

I was as far away from Lowmead as I could possibly be.

TEN

Australia’s first foray into the war on terror, in Afghanistan, ended in December 2002, with the troops home in time for Christmas. However, three months later the SAS was back in action as part of the invasion of Iraq, supported by a company from 4 RAR, which had been converted to a commando battalion.

After the ‘shock and awe’ of the invasion was over, the Americans and their coalition partners found themselves drawn into an urban guerrilla conflict as remnant forces still loyal to Saddam Hussein, and Al-Qaeda affiliates, waged a hit-and-run war against the infidel invaders. Australia’s commitment was a task group made up of an infantry company, a squadron of light armoured vehicles, a support company and a detachment of PMVs – the newly introduced Bushmaster protected mobility vehicles. The Aussies were based in Al Muthanna Province, in the south of Iraq, west of Basrah.

Back in Australia, the soldiers of 6 RAR watched the progress of the war in Iraq and looked for ways we could get involved. The share house Johns and I had been living in at Albany Creek had been sold, so I had moved out and found a new place to rent, with another mate, Blakey, at Strathpine. Graham Blake was a good guy, who always had my back. His motto in life was work smarter, not harder.

My deployment to East Timor and my time in Malaysia had whetted my appetite. I read in the army newspaper that protected mobility was the way forward. For now, it seemed the days of infantry slogging through the jungles of Vietnam or East Timor were over. Wars were being fought in cities and in deserts, with infantry riding into battle not in the six-wheel-drive Land Rovers that we had been using in 6 RAR, but in the new Australian-designed and locally made Bushmaster PMVs.

The Bushmaster was basically a big, four-wheeled armoured truck, bristling with antennae and guns. The vehicle had been designed and developed by ADI – Australian Defence Industries – and carried forward into production by the French-owned company Thales. The first vehicles rolled off the production line in 2005, destined for service in Iraq, and also ultimately Afghanistan, which Australia would be drawn back into in 2005 following the return and resurgence of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, who had been hiding in Pakistan since the end of 2002.

I applied to go on a course to learn how to drive the Bushmaster, not really knowing much about the vehicle or its capabilities, but I figured that it might be my shortcut to another overseas trip. I was an infantry soldier, now with a tour of East Timor under my belt, but I wanted more. I had learned a good deal on the Timor deployment and grown as a person and a solider. I had discovered that leadership was not just about the rank you wore, but how you conducted yourself and how you could inspire other people. I had discovered a good deal, sometimes too much, about my fellow soldiers and I had realised that everything Grandad had told me was true.

The infantry was giving me time to find out what I wanted in life, and for now that was to stay in the same job, but to look for new opportunities and new challenges. So much of what Grandad had taught me, about staying true to myself, about self-discipline – like making my bed every morning and cleaning up after myself – had prepared me perfectly for a life in the army.

The Bushmaster PMV course was conducted in late 2005 at the School of Armour, in Puckapunyal, Victoria, somewhere I had never been. Like most army bases, it was a middle-of-nowhere place.

A couple of my mates were also on the course, Hutto and Jared ‘Crash’ MacKinney, another member of Delta Company. While the company was not big, about 100 people at any one time, we worked and tended to socialise mostly in our sections of eight people, and to a lesser extent the thirty-six-strong platoon. Crash and I had crossed paths several times and for a while we had served together in Support Company. We were acquaintances rather than best mates, but I'd known him for a few years and liked him.

He was short of stature, but larger than life in many other ways. A redhead like me, with a pair of impressive sideburns, Crash was a cheeky bugger; he was like Teflon – he had a knack for causing trouble, but nothing ever stuck to him. When the dust settled, it was always someone else who copped the blame for what had gone wrong and Crash was left grinning.

Crash and I, a few other members of the battalion and people from a range of other units assembled at Puckapunyal – Pucka – and had our first introduction to the Bushmaster PMV. I had been driving for years – some of them illegally – but I'd only ever been behind the wheel of cars and a tractor. This thing was like a big armoured box on wheels, with thick armoured-glass windows.

'Holy shit,' I said to Crash as we walked around one of the vehicles, 'if you ran over someone in one of these things, you wouldn't even know.'

An instructor droned through the vehicle's specifications: 'The Bushmaster weighs eleven tonnes and is seven metres long. It carries a driver and nine passengers and can be fitted with a .50-cal machine gun or 40-millimetre grenade launcher in the central ring mount and two 7.62-millimetre machine guns on front and rear swing mounts.'

I patted the side of it. This was a different way of going to war. Not only would we be motorised infantry, but we'd be protected from bullets and landmines, thanks to the V-shaped hull and monocoque chassis, and we'd pack a punch with the onboard armament.

'The Bushmaster is powered by a 7.2-litre, six-cylinder turbocharged Caterpillar diesel engine,' the instructor carried on. 'This vehicle is almost indestructible, but they cost half a million dollars each, so do not break one.'

It was a brute of a thing. Over eight weeks, we drove them day and night, on convoy exercises, and in the field, traversing the open country of the Pucka ranges in cavalry formations. The vehicles were new and so was the gear on board. We had excellent radio communications, something we had struggled with on foot with our older radios.

That didn’t stop things going wrong. On a road-driving exercise, we headed up toward Melbourne Airport at Tullamarine, but the guy in the lead vehicle took a wrong turn along the route and our convoy of heavily armed monster trucks ended up getting snarled up in Melbourne’s CBD traffic. This was not an easy vehicle to do a three-point turn in a city street with.

The power of the vehicle was amazing. It could go anywhere, but we deliberately bogged the vehicles in order to learn how to recover them when they were stuck. One vehicle had enough torque and power to drag two others out of the mud. On the open road, we found we could wind them up to about 110 kilometres per hour, given the chance, and one guy reckoned he had clocked 120. Eventually, the army saw the potential risk of young soldiers hooning along in an eleven-tonne vehicle at that speed and put governors on the engines that limited them to 100 kilometres per hour.

Sitting in the driver’s seat, I could automatically adjust the tyre pressure to help me traverse mud or soft sand, or a tar road and although it was a huge beast, I had power steering and six forward gears. Inside the Bushmaster, I felt almost invincible; it couldn’t have been more different to patrolling on foot in the jungle, where it seemed like everything was out to get you.

Parts of the Bushmaster’s exterior, however, were prone to damage – because they were designed that way. The external stowage bins, for example, were made of a lighter grade of aluminium with the idea being that if the vehicle went over a landmine, much of the blast would be absorbed by the bins and they would be blown off the vehicle, leaving the armoured hull intact.

On one occasion on the course, I was driving through the bush on a night-time exercise, wearing a set of Ninox night-vision goggles, which amplify ambient light from the moon and stars, painting everything a ghostly, luminous green. Like most things, they’re not nearly as effective as they appear in the movies and it’s hard to perceive depth when wearing them, especially in fog and rain. I made a turn through an obstacle course and heard a screeching noise as I inadvertently collected a star picket buried in the ground which scored a line all down one side of the storage bins.

Another time, a couple of bins fell off when I misjudged the ground clearance during a creek crossing. All in all, though, it was a tough vehicle and would save many lives through its design once we got on operations.

There was study to do in the evenings and quite a bit of night driving, but every now and then we were able to have a few drinks and get up to some mischief, such as chasing each other around the barracks with fire extinguishers.

At the end of eight weeks, Crash, Hutto and I had completed the course and the whole group had a barbecue on base with a few beers. Some of us were ready for a big night out, so we headed to the nearest town, Seymour. There had been a problem in town just before our course began, with a fight between one of the guys from a mine nearby and a soldier, so tensions were still quite high when a new course of diggers hit the local pubs and nightclubs that night.

Things seemed to be going well, with plenty of dancing and carrying on at the nightclub we'd chosen. Crash and I both had to go to the men's room at the same time, but he finished first and went back out into the ultraviolet light and booming music. When I emerged, I saw a smoke machine had been turned on – and that there was more than just dancing going on.

One of the locals had apparently taken exception to the soldiers and grabbed one guy's full drink and started pouring it into a few of his mates' glasses and things had kicked off from there.

Hutto had been in the action early on, but a bouncer had enlisted him and another soldier from the course, a big Islander guy, to try to break things up.

Crash and I waded into the fight, not knowing Hutton was, in fact, trying to stop it. Fists started flying over at the pool table and I saw that one bloke had gotten a chokehold on Crash and he was clearly in trouble.

I didn't know what Crash had done, but I wasn't going to stand for that, or miss out on the action. I ran over to the table and delivered an elbow to the head of Crash's assailant. It was only as my victim spun around that I, one: noticed the 'security' badge on bouncer's shirtfront, and, two: saw that the person I had just struck was not a he, as I had assumed.

‘Oh, shit,’ I said, backing away, ‘you’re a chick!’

The thought that I had hit a woman appalled me. Months earlier, Hutto and I had been out one night in Brisbane, in a club in Fortitude Valley, and I’d punched a guy because he had been harassing a group of young women and would not take no for an answer from them. I couldn’t believe I’d now done even worse than him.

I felt terrible and I knew that my actions would have repercussions.

The nightclub must have had a direct line to the local police station, because it seemed like less than a minute before the place was swarming with cops. Hot on their heels the military police from Puckapunyal army base arrived and everyone spilled outside into the night.

Hutto was being vouched for by the bouncer who had asked him to help and Crash and I took advantage of the confusion to slip away.

We thought we were free and in the clear, but we only made it about fifty metres down the street when the cops caught up with us. Crash and I were loaded into a divvy van and taken to the police station.

‘I’m not making any statements, I’m still drunk,’ I said to the police officer who was questioning me.

The police ended up letting us go but warned us we would be charged and would have to face court at some point. By the time we had finished with the law, it was almost dawn, Crash and I just made it back to base, without any sleep, before the course was due to march out the next day.

Just before the end of the course, we had learned that 2 RAR would be the next battalion to deploy troops to the Al Muthanna Task Group in Iraq and that they would be taking a detachment of Bushmaster PMV drivers with them from 6 RAR.

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Crash and I passed the course, which was important to me as I wanted to qualify to be part of the detachment going to Iraq. I hoped that getting arrested wouldn’t hurt my chances of being selected, and that the police didn’t lay charges before we left.

We returned to Brisbane and the battalion, and were given the nod to go to Iraq. We were then sent to Townsville to take part in pre-deployment training with the other units who would make up the next rotation of the task group.

There was a sense of urgency and commitment to this exercise that was different to any other I'd taken part in, even preparation for Timor. There was a definite feeling that we were going somewhere serious.

'If we fuck up over there, if we don't get it right, people will die,' Sergeant Adrian Ross warned us. At six foot four, Ross was as big as a first-grade Rugby player.

On the ranges around Townsville, the exercise planners had done their best to replicate the situations and locations we would encounter in Iraq. There were mock-ups of the types of FOBs, forward operating bases, where we would be stationed, and Iraqi villages. We took turns at manning guard towers and practised attacking fortified objectives. Live firing exercises added to the feeling that the shit was about to get real.

In a lecture theatre, we were given a talk and shown a PowerPoint presentation by an NCO who had already served as part of the task group.

'What I'm about to teach you could save your life, so listen up,' he said. He clicked the remote to bring up an image of a dead donkey. 'Roadkill over there can mean an animal has tripped a landmine or an IED. You need to keep your eyes open all the time. A patch of disturbed earth could mean someone's just buried an IED there.'

Improvised Explosive Devices, IEDs, were proving to be one of the enemy's most effective weapons of choice. No-one had been setting booby-trapped bombs to kill us in East Timor, so we were all paying attention.

As well as learning about the enemy, we trained to work together, across different corps of the army. The battle group would include LAVs, eight-wheeled light armoured vehicles, and the detachment I was part of would be in Bushmasters. The LAV guys showed us around their vehicles. Those of us from 6 RAR were now learning to go to war in different vehicles, and one thing I noticed was that all of the armoured corps guys carried rolled-up green canvas swags for sleeping.

‘We need to get some of those,’ I said.

‘No,’ one of our NCOs countered. ‘You’re infantry soldiers. You can’t take swags into battle.’

It seemed that in some parts of the army, there was still no place for common sense.

I had a feeling that once we got to Iraq and the bullets started to fly, old rules and preconceptions would give way to practicalities. I had been in the army for six years now and I had learned there was more than one way to skin a cat. One of the best things about Australian soldiers is that we have the ability to adapt. Some armies are trained to do as they’re told and not think for themselves, but Australian diggers have a knack for getting the job done.

We would soon learn if our training had been worth it.

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Before I left Australia for Iraq, I wanted to visit my grandad. I had bought a motorcycle, a Honda CBR250R, and I rode up to see him from Brisbane.

He was getting older and I was bigger and fitter, but the timeless rituals of life on the water in his little tinnie hadn’t changed. It wasn’t long before we were out there.

‘I wanted some money out of the bank, Danny,’ he said as he cast a line, ‘but when I went in there to draw it out of my term deposit, they reckoned it didn’t exist. I had the original docket and everything, from years ago, when your Grandma and I moved from Melbourne to Queensland, but those buggers at the bank reckoned it wasn’t there anymore. I think someone might have stolen it.’

I didn’t know what to make of this and offered to help, but he reckoned he had it under control.

I wasn’t so sure. His health seemed to have deteriorated significantly – he looked not only older but frailer than I had ever seen him. Grandma confided to me that his fight with the bank, which had been going on for longer than he had let on, had sapped his strength.

The next morning, we were back in the tinnie, catching some bait in the canal with a net in preparation for some proper fishing. As he steered us down the waterway, we chatted about my upcoming deployment to Iraq.

‘I’m proud of you, Dan,’ he said, as I helped him feed the net into the canal. ‘What are you going to do in the future? At some point, you’re going to get out of the army. You can better yourself, you know. You’ve got a bit of time up, you’ve got a bit of life experience, think about what you can do next.’

He was always thinking of the future, but I was pretty content in the present. Grandad looked at me, saying nothing for a few moments. ‘It’s very dangerous there, in Iraq, Dan.’

I knew the risks would be greater than in East Timor. Maybe that was why I was so keen to go, but I didn’t go down that path with Grandad.

He let the silence hang for a while, then, perhaps sensing what I was holding back, he gave a nod of understanding. ‘You look after your mates and look after yourself.’

We went back to enjoying the simple rituals of fishing, dragging the net across the canal, hoping for some mullet to use as bait to catch jewfish that evening. About sixty metres from us was a woman on the bank, tossing bread into the water, feeding the fish.

‘You’re catching my pet fish,’ she yelled at us, shaking her fist. ‘I’m going to call the authorities.’

I thought that if I was going to catch those fat fish, feeding on their treat sixty metres away, with our little net then I’d been doing something wrong all these years on the water. In any case, what we were doing was perfectly legal.

I was happy to just ignore her, but Grandad, unusually, became very upset.

He motored over to her and showed her the bucket with the few fish we’d caught already.

‘We’re not doing anything wrong,’ he pleaded with her.

Grandad, who had been so calm, so controlled all these years, had let this woman rattle him. It seemed to me, though, later, that it was the business with the bank that had brought on the stress. Fortunately, he and my grandmother were not hard up for money, but not being able to access his nest egg had really undone him. It wasn't just emotional, either; it looked to me like this had come as a physical blow to him. He did not look well.

The next morning, packed for the ride back to barracks in Brisbane, I kickstarted my motorcycle, gave Grandad a wave and smiled at him, for the last time ever.

ELEVEN

In Kuwait, we were issued weapons and other mission-essential equipment and given a series of briefings about the situation in Iraq. It was May 2006, and things were heating up in the Middle East.

‘We’ve been encountering different types of IEDs,’ one of the officers who had served in Iraq told us. He was on his way back from ROCL, relief out of country leave, and had offered to give us an impromptu lecture on the current IED threat. ‘They’re using explosive-formed projectiles now, a copper slug behind a concave-shaped charge. We’re talking 200 kilograms of explosive as opposed to twenty in the earlier IEDS. That thing will put a hole through the side of a fucking Abrams tank.’

We also learned that the Australian base, Camp Smitty, had taken direct fire several times in the last few weeks. The political decision had been taken to wind down our involvement in Iraq and to transition to more of a training mission to prepare the Iraqi military to adopt a greater role in the fight, and it seemed like the enemy wanted to rub in their supposed victory.

‘Fuck, why didn’t we hear this earlier?’ one of the guys whispered. This was all news to us.

We flew to Iraq in the night and landed at Tallil. From there, some of the contingent travelled by vehicle to Camp Smitty in Al Muthanna Province. I was one of those who went by air, in a Dutch Chinook helicopter. Below us, I could see the convoy pulling out of Tallil. Along the way, the pilot put the big twin-engine chopper down on the main road. These guys flew this route nearly every day and they were highly attuned to any changes that had occurred. The pilot had noticed a disturbance of some kind on the roadway and decided to check it out. While the engines turned and burned and we waited, the kerosene smell of aviation gas wafting into the back of the aircraft from the exhaust, the loadmaster in his brown flight suit and bulbous green helmet got out to inspect the road. He gave the all clear and we took off again.

Camp Smitty was not what I had expected. The bases we had passed through so far had been huge, sprawling affairs built around airstrips that could take massive transport aircraft; by contrast, our new home was much smaller. The walls were made of Hescos, modular steel-mesh baskets wrapped in hessian and filled with dirt or rubble. There were guard towers at intervals along the walls, giving the place the look and feel of a medieval fort.

The smell of the place reminded me of the open sewage drains I'd first encountered in Malaysia. The toilets were all portaloos and I could tell immediately that chemical toilets and blistering heat did not go well together.

It had been a long journey and we were all tired. As exciting as being in Iraq was, I needed to get some sleep. It seemed like I had just closed my eyes when a siren went off.

'Holy shit, what's that?' someone said in the dark.

'Incoming,' someone else added.

I heard an explosion. Then the *crump-crump* of mortar rounds leaving their tubes.

'I'm trying to sleep, you fuckers!' I called from my sleeping bag.

We all rolled out of our stretchers and there was a scramble in the half-light for body armour and weapons. We ran outside into the still-hot night and found our shelter, between concrete-filled Hescos. Half an hour later, the all-clear siren sounded, and we went back to sleep.

The next morning, we took a look around the compound. There, sticking out of the ground, almost comically, was the green tail fins of a mortar round.

'Now, that wasn't there before,' I said.

The mortar round had spudded in, embedding itself in the sand and failing to detonate. It had landed near the vehicle park and there was shrapnel and some superficial damage done by 107-millimetre rockets, another favourite weapon of the Iraqi insurgents.

Perhaps it was due to having grown up in a chaotic environment, but I was almost surprised at how blasé I became, in a very short period of time. I took the view that unless a mortar round or a rocket was falling down on top of me, then there was no point in worrying about it.

Meanwhile, back in Australia, the police who responded to the nightclub brawl while Crash and I were on course at Pucka had finally caught up with us – almost. They had our details, and had sent us summonses, but little did they know we were half a world away in the Middle East. I learned via email that we had both been charged with assault. Here I was in Iraq, fighting for my country, and the Victoria Police wanted to lock me up. Bizarre.

To try to sort the mess out, I tracked down the arresting officer and called him on the phone.

‘Um, I’m in Iraq and I won’t be home for another five months,’ I explained, ‘what’s the go?’

The cop was not unsympathetic, and he said that if I entered a guilty plea, I would probably receive a fine and that was the end of it. That’s how it panned out for me and as far as the army went, in those days at least, I had stepped into the fight to protect a mate, so there was no blowback on me.

Things went worse for Crash, who ended up having to get a lawyer and trek down to Victoria to face court when we returned to Australia.

*

Iraq is a stinking, choking cocktail of destruction.

It’s the oily scent of rubber tyres melting into asphalt. It was so hot, more than fifty degrees on some days, that if you weren’t wearing gloves you would burn your hand if you were sitting up in the cupola of the Bushmaster and laid your hand on the metal roof.

It’s the lingering odour of burning rubbish and shit from the open sewers in the towns, or the greasy residue of diesel and fertiliser in the wake of an IED. As we got better at detecting where roadside bombs were hidden, the insurgents started burying them in the road itself. They would pour diesel on to the tar surface of the road at night to soften it up and then dig a hole and plant their deadly seeds of destruction.

Out in the desert, dust storms filled your nose, ears and mouth.

Our job, acting as the protected transport for the task group, wasn’t glamorous, but it was essential. During pre-deployment training, us 6 RAR guys had been the butt of dismissive remarks from some of the 2 RAR grunts.

‘You blokes’ll just be driving, you won’t be doing much,’ one had said.

The truth was that we were busy all the time. Three-quarters of our work was escorting convoys between the main base at Tallil and Camp Smitty. We were up before dawn each day, checking our vehicles, hooking up trailers then heading out. The work alternated between boring – long hours on the road – and moments of hyper attentiveness as we stopped to check for suspected IEDs or passed the smoking remains of bombs that had gone off, sometimes claiming victims.

On one occasion, a 2 RAR CSM came on a drive and found our daily routine an eye-opener. ‘I thought you guys just went out and got some supplies,’ the surprised CSM said, when we returned to base just on last light after a long day.

At the same time, the 2 RAR guys were doing foot patrols, most of the time close to the nearby town, for a couple of hours at a time. I got the strong sense that the amount of active patrolling was winding down in line with our government’s decision to withdraw from Iraq and leave the fight to the locals. I’m sure the politicians back in Canberra had passed down the word that we didn’t want any unnecessary casualties.

That’s not to say we didn’t get in the shit sometimes. We did.

*

I stood in the cupola of the Bushmaster behind the 7.62-millimetre MAG58 machine gun, scanning the compounds and buildings as we left Camp Smitty to escort a 2 RAR detachment under the command of Major Andrew Stevens out to an Iraqi Army outpost at Rumaythah, where the major had a meeting with the locals.

We were keyed up, because a couple of weeks earlier we had taken fire near the same town – the first time I had been shot at. A sniper had fired on our Bushmaster and we didn't even see him. Two rounds had pinged into the armoured shield on the rear gunner's position as we had driven through Rumaythah.

'That could have killed me!' the gunner had yelled as we accelerated out of the contact. Not surprisingly, he was visibly shaken up.

I hadn't been worried. Perhaps there was something different in my make-up. I'm not overly brave or foolish – at least, I don't think I am – but rather than thinking, *That shot could have killed me*, I was grateful that no-one had been injured, and eager to take the fight to the enemy.

Maybe I just don't think about the consequences of my actions. Call it courageous or stupid, but I had spurred my pony into the path of the bull that had been charging Mum without a second thought. I wasn't riding to her rescue – at least, I didn't think of it in the moment that I kicked Benny-B in the ribs, it was more a feeling that this was something I had to do. An instinct.

Then, with the bull, as when bullets struck the Bushmaster, I didn't panic or feel fear. Perhaps it was because my childhood was so chaotic that I couldn't afford to be scared or cry or complain or think, *What if* . . . I had no options but to carry on, and there was no-one in my life who was overly protective, who ever said to me, 'Don't do that, Dan, because you might get hurt.'

Like the other Bushmaster crews of two, we alternated between driving and manning the gun. Occasionally, we would dismount and do our own little patrols, to check out something suss, or just get out for a walk. Under SOPs, standard operating procedures, we had to don full protective gear if we got out of the vehicles: helmets, shoulder protectors and neck protectors.

We looked like American gridiron players; robo-soldiers trussed up in gear so cumbersome it was hard to even bring my F88 Steyr rifle up to my eye to take a sight picture. Just as we'd been overburdened with gear in Timor, here the notion of force protection was actually making it harder for us to fight. It was crazy.

On our second visit to Rumaythah, we had a plan, but as happens in real-time operations, it didn't survive long after we left base. The idea had been to bring all the vehicles into the Iraqi base, but when we arrived, we discovered it was a tiny compound and we wouldn't all fit.

'Keep an eye out for RPGs and snipers,' Sergeant Ross said over the radio. We didn't need reminding.

Only one of the Bushmasters could fit in the compound, so the rest of us, including three LAVs, set up about 300 metres outside the compound in a football field – in reality, not much more than a rectangular piece of rocky open ground with soccer goalposts at each end.

We kept watch while the meeting went ahead. I scanned our surrounds from behind the MAG58 and kept an eye on a water tower.

'Something's suss here,' Sergeant Ross said over the radio. 'Eyes on that building.'

The structure Ross was indicating was three storeys high, but it wasn't much more than a gutted shell. It looked like it had been hit by a JDAM, a joint direct attack munition or 'smart' guided bomb that the Americans dropped from aircraft. All the building's doors and windows had been blown out. It was still a good hiding place.

Sure enough, as the meeting ended and the officers exited the compound in their Bushmaster, two gunmen opened up on us, one from the tower and the other in the old building. I saw a muzzle flash and the silhouette of someone in a window and I opened fire. Spent brass casings and metal links from the disintegrating belt tinkled around me and the smell of cordite fired me up.

Shit, I thought, *someone is actually shooting at me*. It didn't scare me, as the rounds were landing ten to fifteen metres away, and I was too buzzed from actually firing my weapon in anger – firing in combat as opposed to training – for the first time.

A JTAC, the joint terminal attack controller, started talking into his radio, calling up American air support. Yanks do love dropping bombs, so we knew the fast movers – jets – or Apache attack helicopters wouldn't be far away.

For our part, the vehicles stayed in formation and provided fire support as our passengers, the infantry from 2 RAR, jumped out the back of the Bushmasters and started assaulting the bombed-out building, about 300 metres away from us.

People were chatting on the radios, giving target indications.

'One's running,' someone said.

A shooter sprinted across the road from one building to another. Bullets chased him.

'He's quick,' someone said. 'He's on the dash for cash.' That's what we had ended up calling the low-risk, high-paying deployments to East Timor, the Dili Dash for Cash.

The JTAC advised us over the radio net that air support was inbound.

'Get the Aussie flag out and let's get it on the roof,' one of the guys inside our vehicle said. 'We want to make sure that jet doesn't drop a bomb on us.'

On the ground, it was game on. The 2 RAR guys continued assaulting forward. Someone fired a 66 at a building, the trail of the rocket-launched projectile's smoke ending in a bang and a puff of dust.

I was firing away when Scott Magennis, my driver, reached around from his seat and punched me in the balls to get my attention.

'Watch that dude,' Scott said. An Iraqi civilian in robes and a checked headdress appeared in the street.

I swung my gun from the building to the man, ready to fire, then noticed he was unarmed and hopping about, like he was dancing for joy in the street in his sandals. He was also pointing behind him and giving us exaggerated thumbs-up signs.

'He's pointing at the snipers,' a voice said over the radio.

That was Iraq. Half the population was happy to see us, the other half wanted to kill us. The difficult part was knowing who was who.

I continued to look for targets, firing my MAG58 over the heads of the assaulters who were closing on the buildings. Amid the hail of bullets, 40-millimetre grenades fired from M203 launchers fitted to Steyr rifles, and the occasional explosion from a 66, a flood of schoolchildren burst from one of the surrounding buildings.

‘Fuck, it’s a school,’ someone said.

‘Cease fire, cease fire!’ the platoon commander yelled.

We didn’t know whether school had simply been dismissed for the day or if the insurgents had deliberately forced the kids onto the street, knowing that our commander would pull the pin immediately rather than risk children being wounded or killed.

The US Air Force jet that had been summoned by the JTAC came on station. It was too late and too dangerous to drop any bombs, but the platoon commander gave the order for the aircraft to come in low. It roared in over the buildings and the supersonic boom as it broke the sound barrier hopefully gave the snipers the message that they had narrowly escaped being vaporised.

*

Another day, an unexploded IED had been discovered and I was tasked with taking a British Army explosive ordnance disposal team out to make it safe by disarming it or blowing it up in place.

If we had driven the most direct route to where the IED had been found, it would have taken us about half an hour, but that would have also meant driving on the main road, where a vehicle had been blown up and someone killed just a couple of days earlier. Instead, a circuitous cross-country route was plotted that would keep the patrol clear of all main roads.

‘Where the fuck are you guys going?’ the British NCO in charge of the EOD team asked me after we had spent an hour negotiating back streets.

‘The scenic route,’ I told him.

‘How much longer? We need to get there *now*.’

‘Couple of hours.’

He fumed. I didn’t care. I knew that the IED had been cordoned off so there was no time pressure, and what was three hours of your life if it saved someone else’s? What else were we going to do with our day?

People said we had been lucky in Iraq, not losing an Australian soldier to enemy fire, but to a certain extent we made our own luck, by taking precautions, and no-one wanted to be the first and last Australian to die in combat. Having said that, I didn’t shy away from a fight and was ready to hook in given half the chance.

In Iraq, the enemy played a cat-and-mouse game with us, using IEDs and firing the odd shot at us. It was frustrating. Rather than letting it bother me, I was more of the opinion of, ‘Here I am, take a shot at me and let’s have a go.’ They were too smart, however, to bring on a pitched battle as they knew full well the resources we and the Americans could bring to bear with little notice.

We finally arrived at the IED and the Brits got out to inspect it. The lethal device was three 107-millimetre rockets daisy-chained together. The EOD team was able to defuse it and tossed it in the back of the car.

On the way back to base, we took a different route again – it never paid to drive the same roads twice in close succession. We came across a civilian truck that had been destroyed by an IED. No matter how many precautions you took you could never totally second-guess the enemy. Who knew if this truck had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time, or if there was someone on board the insurgents were targeting?

We got out to have a look. The truck was burning, already down to its wheel rims. There was the oily smell of diesel hanging in the overcooked air and the pungent odour of fertiliser, the main ingredient in roadside bombs.

There was the usual crowd of civilian onlookers beyond a cordon. A little boy gave us the finger and an older man spat in the dirt, a sign of his anger and disrespect. In Timor, the children had waved and smiled at us from their humble but neatly kept houses. Here, the gutters were full of rubbish and there were several burned-out buildings along the street. Traffic, diverted because of the blast, honked impatiently and amid the minor traffic jam of Toyotas, a Bedouin guy led two camels piled high with rugs and bags of goods he was taking to town to trade. Past and present collided here, with conflict the only common denominator.

Of course, for many Iraqis, life had been ostensibly peaceful under the former dictator Saddam Hussein, apart from an eight-year war with Iran – and as long as you weren't a Kurd or one of Saddam's other political enemies, who would be assassinated or attacked with chemical weapons.

Out near the Syrian border one day, we met a group of Iraqi soldiers, one of whom was carrying a bunch of bananas.

'How much, mate?' I asked him, pointing to the bananas.

He spoke some English. 'Not for sale. Under Saddam, we were not allowed to have bananas.'

'Really?' He was clearly making the most of the new banana-freedom. 'What was it like in the old days, under Saddam?'

Around us were several burned-out tanks, destroyed in some previous conflict, recent or old. He shrugged. 'Better and worse.'

'How so?' I asked, curious.

Another Iraqi soldier chimed in. 'People went missing. I had family members who disappeared.'

'Infrastructure was better,' said the first soldier. 'These days no-one is in charge. Saddam was organised, now we have only chaos.'

*

The Australian task group pulled out of Camp Smitty, leaving it in the hands of the Iraqi Army, and moved to the much larger Tallil Air Base. Tallil was a classic American enclave, with a McDonald's, pizza and steak restaurants, a gym and a PX – a deployable department store.

Moving to a larger base didn't mean that we were out of danger, or that we could escape the mundane duties of soldierly life. But even the mundane duties could have their surprises. One morning, I was on picket, manning a defence tower at 3.30 am, when through the green glow of my night-vision device, I made out an infamous local man having sex with his donkey. His prowess and routine were legendary; everyone had seen him.

You have to laugh, even in a war zone – especially in a war zone. When we left Camp Smitty, one of the guys left a present for the new occupants: a shit in the air conditioning duct.

We were big on toilet humour. The person standing in the ring mount of the Bushmaster, behind the MAG58 – me on one memorable patrol – would sometimes engage in ‘crop dusting’, farting on the troops sitting in the back. As I stood in the cupola that time, enjoying what passed for fresh air in Iraq, I smiled at the screams coming from inside the vehicle. ‘That smells like fucking three-week-old roadkill,’ one of my victims yelled.

The following night, I was working late to prepare for an early morning convoy departure. I took my Bushmaster to the refuelling point and loaded up with diesel. I wasn’t feeling well; I had picked up a bug and had an upset stomach. I finished at the pump, filled out the inevitable paperwork for the fuel and drove off. About 100 metres on, I felt a bump and thought someone had crashed into me.

I looked around and in my wing mirror I saw a flash. Unsure what had happened, I carried on another couple of hundred metres then stopped and got out. There was a dust cloud hanging in the air where I had just passed through. I heard sirens. My ears were ringing and I felt dizzy, which I put down to my illness. I returned to the Australian compound and one of the NCOs came up to me as I got out of the Bushmaster.

‘What the fuck are you driving around for? You should be taking cover.’

My head felt woolly. ‘Why?’

‘We’re under bloody attack. We’re being rocketed.’

‘Oh.’

‘What’s wrong with you, Dan – you look pale?’

I thought about the flash. I’d had the hatch above me closed, but it dawned on me what had happened. ‘I think I was just nearly blown up.’

He went past me to the vehicle, and inspected it. ‘It looks like the bloody paint’s been blasted off.’

I went to where he was touching the armoured side. ‘It wasn’t like that before.’

‘You better go to the hospital, get yourself checked out.’

I did. The doctor asked me what was wrong.

‘I’ve been feeling sick all day and just about took a rocket up the arse after topping up the tank in the Bushmaster.’ Coming to think of it, my farts on the patrol that day had nearly stripped the paint from the interior of the Bushmaster as well, so perhaps I really was not well.

Between us, we worked out that the overpressure from the exploding rocket had probably shaken me up, internally. Thinking back on it, it felt like I’d been kicked in the guts or that someone had hit me. It was bizarre, knowing that I could have been killed, and not even realising it when it happened.

*

Halfway through the deployment, my mate Blakey, with whom I shared the house at Strathpine, and I went on ROCL, relief out of country leave, to Amsterdam, London and Dublin.

One minute we had been in Iraq, being shot at by snipers and driving past vehicles and people that had been obliterated by IEDs, the next Blakey and I were on leave getting pissed on Guinness. It was surreal.

It was odd, being surrounded by people not in uniform. I found myself continually experiencing moments of panic as I went for my weapon. We never went anywhere in Iraq without our rifle or pistol and it was odd going about unarmed. We never went outside the wire without a team, vehicles, body armour, guns and ammo, and here Blakey and I were walking the streets by ourselves, unarmed.

We hired a little canal boat in Amsterdam and used that to do some sightseeing. When we got off and continued on foot, we got lost and I flagged down a guy on a bicycle to ask for directions. He was wearing leather, which I deduced might mean he was enjoying Amsterdam Gay Pride, which was happening in Holland at the time.

He was helpful, told us where to go and left with a broad smile. As he set off, riding away from us and standing up on the pedals, I noticed that his leather pants were actually arseless chaps.

The odd feelings of being out of a war zone receded quickly and we were able to decompress and enjoy our leave. We took pictures in the red-light district in Amsterdam and got drunk in various pubs in England and Ireland. I particularly enjoyed Ireland; it was good to see lush green grass and rolling hills, and even the rain was a welcome change from the sand, dust and urban decay of Iraq.

Flying back to Kuwait was depressing. I felt like shit. After a brief stopover, we boarded a Hercules for the flight back to Tallil in Iraq. As the cargo aircraft’s ramp was lowered and we walked down and on to the tarmac, I felt a blast of heat. I thought it was the exhaust from the Hercules’ engines, but as Blakey and I moved away from the C-130, it just got hotter. The ambient temperature was even hotter than the prop wash. Sweat was running down my back after walking just 100 metres.

Welcome back to the Middle East, I thought.

The second half of the tour was pretty uneventful. Tallil, with its fast-food joints and mod cons, was more like a slice of America than Iraq and with the main Australian base now closed, most of my duties involved convoys and convoy protection, rather than supporting patrols in the field.

On one run, we went back to Camp Smitty and got out and had a look. While we had handed it over to the Iraqi Army, they had since pulled out, taking anything of value with them. The place looked like it had been looted, with everything from electrical wiring to air conditioners ripped out of the buildings. Anything that wasn’t nailed down had been stolen and probably sold.

It was as though we had never been there.

TWELVE

The main welcome home for the task group took place at Townsville, 2 RAR’s hometown, in late December 2006. The rest of us, from 6 RAR, flew on to Brisbane afterward.

As usual, there was nobody waiting at the airport to welcome me home.

After my exposure to action in Iraq, I was interested in trying out for Special Forces. To join either the commandos or the SAS, I would first have to pass the Special Forces barrier test. This consisted of a 2.4-kilometre run, dressed in uniform and boots and carrying a rifle and webbing, in under nine minutes, heaves, sit-ups, a 400-metre swim in uniform and a demonstrated proficiency in handling some unfamiliar weapons and giving and receiving orders. If you passed that, you could then be recommended to attempt commando or SAS selection.

The first step for me was a medical, to check out a knee injury I had sustained while doing PT in Iraq. The diagnosis was worse than I thought. I had a complex tear in the medial meniscus, which put paid to any plans of joining Special Forces for now. I had surgery and took it easy around Enoggera Barracks, on light duties for a while, and when my medical status was upgraded again to fully fit, I put in my application to do the barrier test.

Not long after, my mother called me. That, in itself, was a bit of a surprise, as we didn’t speak often.

‘Dan,’ Mum said, ‘I’m sorry, love, your grandad’s dead.’

The shock hit me almost immediately.

‘He was swimming – you know how much he loved doing his laps – and he had a heart attack.’ Mum had, by this time, split from my father and moved back to Nambour. She had been living with her parents when Grandad died.

I felt like I'd been punched, king-hit in the face without warning. He had been my father figure, far more than my real dad. He had motived me and inspired me, and I had weighed his words of advice carefully, time after time during my life, considered them and acted on them. In my unstable upbringing, his had been the one voice of reason. He had been my guide in life and now he was gone.

I couldn't believe it.

I was the man I was – I had served my country overseas, had been living a life with goals and direction, and looked out for my mates – because of that man. I could have been unemployed, a drunk or a drug addict or some petty criminal if I had let the other forces in my life steer me in a different direction.

Nothing would ever be the same, nothing would ever be quite as right as when it had been Grandad and me, out on the river, in his boat. Alan had been my hero, the true hero of this story, and now he was gone.

I rode my bike up to visit Grandma and attend the funeral. As much as Alan had meant to me, I didn't have a speaking role in the service and I barely spoke to any of the other mourners. My uncle Anthony, Mum's brother, gave the eulogy.

It was an open casket and I stood there, looking down at this man who had meant so much to me. I had seen dead bodies at that point, and would see many more over the following years, but never have I felt so moved, nor gazed on someone I loved so much. He was the first family member I had lost, and this was the first funeral I had been to.

The pain was different to that first blow of hearing of his death, but it was no less real. Grandad's death had hurt me more than anything my home life or the army had ever thrown at me.

*

Still numb, but back at the battalion, Tar Finnsson, the beige man, now a corporal, collared me at company HQ.

'Got a minute?' Tar asked.

‘Sure.’

Tar had just returned from Afghanistan where he and some other Bushmaster crews had been working with the commandos and SAS in the SOTG, the Special Operations Task Group at Camp Russell, in Uruzgan Province. The Australian base was named after Sergeant Andrew Russell, the first Australian to die in Afghanistan, killed by a landmine, in 2002.

‘Mate, how are you feeling?’ he asked me.

‘Fine, all fit.’ I told him I’d applied for entry to Special Forces.

‘How’d you like to go to Afghanistan instead?’ Tar asked.

‘Serious?’

‘Yeah. The SOTG guys reached out to me, they want six decent drivers and I’ve got to put together a list. They told me that if I make the recommendations, then the guys are in. Are you in?’

‘You bet,’ I said without a moment’s hesitation. I wanted the experience of going to Afghanistan and I knew that being on operations again would be good money. True to his word, Tar got me the gig and I withdrew my application for the Special Forces barrier test.

In May 2007, five months after returning home, I would be leaving for Afghanistan.

*

Two weeks before I was due to leave, Marcus ‘Rando’ Randall was celebrating his twenty-fifth birthday at the Port Office Hotel in Brisbane. Hutto and I and several of the guys from the platoon were invited.

Marcus’s girlfriend, Hayley, had brought along a friend, Kathryn, and when she introduced her to me, Hayley said that Kathryn and I had actually met once before.

Kathryn smiled and nodded as she said hello.

I blurted out: ‘I don’t remember you at all.’

It wasn’t a great opening line, but we chatted throughout the party. Kathryn had just returned from a working holiday in the UK and now had a job in retail banking at the Bank of Queensland. I told her that I was heading off to Afghanistan soon and she mentioned that her father had served in the navy, so she knew what life was like in the defence force – her father had been at sea for periods of six months at a time.

We got on well and at the end of the night I asked for her phone number, and if I could see her again, on the proviso that she knew that I would be leaving for Afghanistan in a fortnight's time for a three-month tour. Kathryn said yes.

THIRTEEN

I looked out over the village of Charmestan and watched the women, children and old men leaving.

‘No FAMs in that lot,’ one of the guys said over the radio.

We had all noticed the same thing: there were no fighting-aged males, FAMs, to be seen. That, and the exodus of non-combatants, meant the Taliban were waiting in there for us.

It was hot. The winter snow had melted, filling the rivers and the canal that ran through the village we were heading toward. Summer was what the Taliban called the fighting season, when the business of killing was in full swing. I had arrived just in time for it.

The countryside we traversed was spectacular and harsh. Mountains thousands of feet high towered over river valleys and, as we approached villages, like this one, the wide-open rocky desert of the *dascht* gave way to the lush emerald of the green zone, cultivated areas where Afghans grew crops – corn, marijuana and opium.

This village was different to those I had seen in Iraq. There, the buildings had been falling down or ramshackle constructions, but made with modern building materials and strewn with hundreds of haphazardly connected electricity cables. This place looked like it had come out of the children’s illustrated Bible.

Women clutched the veils of their head-to-toe burqas; a couple of the kids waved to us. The people of Afghanistan were friendlier toward us than the Iraqis, but a lot of that was their inbred tradition of Pashtunwali hospitality to strangers. Some of them, like the menfolk no doubt hiding in those sand-coloured mudbrick compounds, would just as soon kill us.

The Special Forces guys started to debus and move on the target. There were about 100 of them on this mission, distinctive from the other regular army soldiers in the task group by their beards and sunglasses.

I took a packet of Berocca tablets out of my pocket and placed a pill on my tongue. It fizzled and popped there, giving me an instant jolt, keeping me awake. I washed it down with a can of Rip It, a caffeine-laden energy drink popular in Iraq and Afghanistan, nicknamed ‘crack’ by US soldiers. I had been on the go for nearly twenty-four hours, with little sleep. We drivers were on a continuous rotation of tasks, supporting Special Forces raids day and night.

If we could, those of us manning the vehicles would grab some shut-eye during the day, but even that was difficult with the dog on board – a Special Forces attack dog which had come to be a real pain the arse. It was fifty degrees in the middle of the day, the Bushmaster’s skin too hot to touch without getting burned, and the only relatively cool place to sleep was under the vehicle, but the attack dog had commandeered that as his personal space. Anyone who tried to share it with him was at risk of losing a hand. He had growled at me again today.

I was learning what it was like to work with Special Forces. For a start, my deployment had been hassle-free. None of the usual bullshit and disorganisation. Once my name had been put forward by Tar Finnsson, and then approved, I had been flown to Randwick Barracks in Sydney to do a day’s pre-deployment training, where they gave us some background on Afghanistan and got us to fill in some paperwork. Then I was on my way. There was no mission rehearsal exercise or lead-up training; I’d been given the nod and I was sent off to a new war. The Special Forces trusted that I would be good to go, rather than having to hold my hand or keep me under constant supervision.

The commando and SAS operators were doing important, dangerous work, direct-action assaults against enemy positions, kicking in doors and looking for HVTs – high-value targets – or persons of interest in the Taliban and Al-Qaeda leadership.

We would leave at dusk and drive the Bushmasters through the night with the team in the back sleeping all the way to the target. Once there, they would get out and do their stuff, and the drivers and crew would have to stay with the vehicles – and stay awake. Once the raid was done, we would drive back. Beroccas and Rip It were the only things keeping me going.

Although the women and children had left the village, not a shot was fired as the Special Forces guys rolled through the compounds. They returned to the vehicles, a little frustrated that they had missed out on some action.

Word was spreading among the enemy that the devils with long beards were best avoided.

We left the village but had not yet cleared the surrounding cornfields when hell was unleashed. An RPG – rocket-propelled grenade – round whooshed out of the crops and flew right between the front and rear radio aerials of the vehicle in front of me.

‘Ambush, right!’ The call was repeated inside our car over the radio, so everyone knew what was going on.

‘Did you see that RPG?’ I yelled to my guys. ‘Holy shit, that gunner will need a change of undies on return to base.’

Our convoy was made up of our armoured Bushmasters and LRPVs and SRVs, highly modified six- and four-wheel drive open Land Rovers with bugger-all protection. What they lacked in armour, the Special Forces vehicles made up for in firepower. Operators manning .50-cal machine guns turned into the ambush and started firing.

On the high ground, a lone patrol of SAS was already moving into a position to engage with the enemy.

I looked in my rear-view mirror as I accelerated and saw another rocket heading for the vehicle behind me. The round glanced off the Bushmaster’s roof between the front and rear gunners, narrowly missing them and sending up a flash of sparks as metal struck metal. Luckily the projectile carried on before detonating into the mountainside.

My vehicle was carrying a detachment of Canadian Special Forces, who were working in support of our guys.

‘Head for the high ground,’ their commander told me as PKM machine guns and AK-47s erupted from the corn in our wake.

I found a hill overlooking the fields and the Canadians exited and set up the 60-millimetre mortars they had brought with them. I looked out from my driver’s seat, searching for targets as they dropped their first couple of rounds down the tubes. There was the *crump-crump* of the bombs leaving on their high-arching trajectory, and clouds of dust as the mortar base plates were driven into the parched ground.

The Taliban knew what was going on and they shifted some of their fire to the mortar line. Bullets started raining in, kicking up puffs of dust in between the crews as the Canadians dropped round after round on the enemy.

‘Holy shit,’ one of them yelled.

From their excited chatter, I gathered that this was the first action that some of the Canadians had ever seen. I had assumed that, being Special Forces, they would have been getting into it all the time, but that wasn’t the case for them. As for me, this was the third time someone had been trying to kill me this week.

The Taliban elected to melt away rather than stand and fight and face the likely prospect of an air strike. The Canadians got back on board and we returned to base.

At Camp Russell we checked the vehicles, fully aware of how lucky we had been not to take any casualties.

‘Fuck, look at this.’ One of the other drivers had his bayonet out and had dug a couple of bullets out of a ration-pack tin that had been stowed on the outside of his Bushmaster.

The commandos had been driving the four-wheel surveillance reconnaissance vehicle Land Rovers, gunned up and festooned with gear. One operator showed us a Javelin anti-armour weapon that had taken a round through its tube.

‘That can’t be good for it,’ one of the commandos said.

‘Shit, is it going to blow up now?’

Afghanistan was a different war to Iraq. At Al Muthanna and Tallil, I had seen a cumulative total of maybe thirty minutes of combat in seven months, but in Afghanistan I was being shot at every time we went out.

And it was intense. Supporting the Special Forces guys, I had been in contacts that went from sun-up to sundown. I had seen US Air Force B-1 bombers dropping huge laser-guided bombs and I had witnessed the awesome power of Spooky, American C-130 Hercules cargo aircraft converted into flying gunships. The AC-130s, the 'A' designating them as ground-attack aircraft, had been fitted with 40-millimetre guns and even an automatic-firing 105-millimetre artillery howitzer. Like the hand of god, Spooky cruised the night skies over Afghanistan, on station to deliver its rain of death at a moment's notice. The enemy feared Spooky, and rightly so.

Unlike Iraq, and not surprising given the number of enemy contacts and the volume of fire, we started taking casualties. I had seen men shot, one in the shin and the other in the arse, and others had experienced near misses, losing a helmet or bits of kit.

How have we not had anyone killed? I would ask myself. We'd had a run of good luck, but I think most of us knew that it would eventually run out, the longer we stayed on operations in Afghanistan. It did, in time.

I would hear the *crack-thump* of a bullet passing overhead and I would feel the smile crossing my face, ear to ear. I like solving problems and there is nothing like someone trying to kill you to put you to the ultimate test. Where had the fire come from? What should I do next? Where should I position the vehicle? What is the enemy going to do next?

Other people would react differently. Some would go wild and scream, some would become extremely serious, others would be scared.

For a time as a child, I had been scared of the dark; living in the bush in Lowmead, in the shack, there was no ambient light, as there had been even in little Maleny, and the blackness of the night was absolute. However, in time I had learned that my imagination was worse than the reality of my life – that even though there was danger out there, it was not directed at me. I remember a pack of dingoes attacking the horses one night: their howling and the fearful neighing of their victims gnawed at my soul and initially I was too frightened to go out and see what had happened.

A fire came through the property another night and I remember Dad beating out burning embers on the old carpet laid on the dirt; that was scarier than the time I was on the tractor, in daylight, ploughing firebreaks. When I could see the reality of danger, like the flames that day on the tractor or the bull charging Mum, I could calmly, instinctively, react to it, to treat it like a problem and solve it. It was at night that I felt the fear.

Now, I was becoming addicted to danger. The more risks I faced and survived, the more I craved. You never how you’re going to react. It’s like running out on your first game of football: you don’t know how you’ll play until you take that first hit. This was similar, except people were trying to kill us. Some people I knew came back from Afghanistan thinking, *This is not for me*, and got out after one deployment. For me, I knew I was suited to this life, risks and all, and I wanted more of it.

I went to Afghanistan with a high level of fitness. I had recovered from my knee problem and I had been in training for the barrier test, but once there, the tempo of operations and the lack of sleep took its toll on me. I came down with a bug, diarrhoea, but a thousand times worse and it laid me out cold. I was delirious and, at one stage, I even thought I was dying.

Somehow, I managed to get hold of someone’s satellite phone in the base hospital ward and called Kathryn.

‘Where are you?’ I asked.

‘I’m at the waterfront, at Redcliffe,’ Kathryn said. ‘Are you alright?’

‘Dunno.’

‘Dan, you’re slurring your words. What’s wrong?’

I can’t even remember what I said to her next, but my plan of calling her, in my fevered state, to tell her I was okay was backfiring. She was worried that if I called my mother in this state, Judy would have a fit.

My deployment had been rough for Kathryn. My expected return date to Australia had been arbitrarily extended by the army from three months to just short of six months. She had put on a brave face, trying to keep it together, when I had told her, but I later learned she broke down in tears on the phone to Hayley after she received the news. I’d barely known this woman for two weeks before I had left and now she was expected to wait almost half a year to see me again. Annoyingly, I would not even be eligible for ROCL as relief out of country leave was only available to soldiers who were away for at least six months.

My biggest fear was not of bullets or death, but of not being able to do my job, or losing the respect of the people I was serving with. The illness was probably my body telling me to take a rest, but I felt pressure to push myself, to get back into the game.

Working with Special Forces was unlike anything I had ever done in the army. As well as their own assets, they could draw on the might of the US-led coalition’s firepower and they had become experts at calling in fire and air support. Orders were given with professionalism, but also without ranting or carrying on.

The focus was on how you did your job, your mastery of tactics, first aid and weapon handling, and all of these were, rightly, more important than dress and bearing and drill and all the other shit that the ‘green’ army, the rest of us, went on with back in Australia. Sometimes it takes getting shot at to work out what is most important in your job, and in life. I learned that I am the most focused, the most engaged, when someone is trying to kill me.

I recovered from my illness and went back to work, without another break. The hours, days, weeks and months rolled on in an exhausting blur, like a dream you know was eventful, but can’t quite recall.

Interspersed with the gunfights and action, as usual, there were moments of humour. One time, we were driving through a boggy patch of the *dascht* and it was like quicksand, with the Bushmasters breaking through the thin crust of dry desert surface and sinking like torpedoed battleships in a glutinous ocean of muck. Those of us who weren’t stuck set about recovering the vehicles that were, just like in training. Once more we were treated to a lesson on the awesome power of the Bushmaster.

An A-frame was attached between a vehicle that hadn’t been caught in the quagmire and one that had. Scott Magennis, the driver of the Bushmaster stuck in the sand, gunned his engine as his mate in front started to pull. The bogged truck erupted from its predicament like a cork out of a champagne bottle and then, with the accelerator pedal still pushed flat, it proceeded to jump up over the A-frame and then mount the recovery vehicle, like a camouflaged dinosaur on Viagra.

By the end of that first deployment, I did not realise it was possible for a human being to be as exhausted as I was and still be able to carry on. Even though I was fully recovered from my illness, the workload ground me down. I was not marching great distances or getting involved in gunfights – I didn’t fire my weapon once in anger during that tour of Afghanistan – but the physical and mental requirements of that job were greater than anything I had ever experienced.

I looked back on my training at the School of Infantry, where I had been so tired I was delirious. Those days and nights that they had put us through, without sleep, had paid off because it gave me an understanding of how long I could continue to function before I suffered a cognitive or physical overload. I knew what it was like to feel my body and mind shutting down and, when it started to happen in Afghanistan, I knew the warning signs and I could deal with them. I didn’t panic, I informed my commanders of how I was feeling. It sucks and it is fucked to be so tired that you cannot function, but because I’d had a glimpse of that barrier I was passing through, I was able to deal with it without breaking down.

Training had been intense, but this was a whole new level of tiredness. It’s not until you push yourself that you become aware of just how much you and your body can take.

I was at the peak of my physical fitness at the beginning of that deployment and by the end I was fifteen kilograms lighter and nearly spent. Having said all that, I enjoyed it. As the return-home date approached, I had a feeling of satisfaction that I had done my job well and, more importantly, that I had made the right decision by joining the army, by staying in the infantry and by becoming qualified as a Bushmaster driver and commander.

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I came home not just to my old life, but also to a new girlfriend who I had almost spent more time with on Facebook Messenger than I had in real life.

I wondered if Kathryn would even recognise me. I was skinny as a rake. The long hours and illness had taken their toll on me.

'You really need some deodorant,' was all she said to me, after we reunited. 'And what's with your hair? It looks like your mum cut it.'

I'd been living the life of a soldier, often with little time to wash. My hair had grown long in Afghanistan and just before I had left, I'd got one of the local guys to cut it and he had done an appalling job. It was going to take me a little longer to adjust to normal life.

As part of getting to know Kathryn better, she invited me to her cousin's wedding in New South Wales.

'Where will we stay?' I asked Kathryn.

'We can stay at my dad's house,' she said.

'Um,' I replied, 'I'm really not comfortable with that.'

'It'll be fine,' Kathryn said, but the idea of us a sharing a bed in her father's house when we were not married did not sit well with me, so I told her as much.

'You're so old-fashioned,' Kathryn said. 'Where did you get that?'

I can't remember if I realised at the time but looking back on it, I'm sure it was based on the things my grandfather had instilled me. Perhaps unconsciously I was living my life as if he was still there, watching the decisions I was making and either giving a thumbs up or a thumbs down.

Instead, I checked us into the only motel in town, which proved to be quite a dump. I hope Grandad was happy, wherever he was.

'Hello, Ben,' one of Kathryn's relatives said to me when we went into the reception.

'It's Dan, actually.' I smiled and tried to be polite about the mistake, but then someone else called me Ben.

'Who's Ben?' I asked Kathryn. 'Some old boyfriend?' I realised there was a lot I did not know about her, and I assumed that her family and friends were getting me mixed up with someone else.

'I don't know any Ben!' she insisted.

When we sat down to eat, I saw that the place card in front of me said ‘Ben’. It turned out her cousin had simply got my name wrong.

A month or so after that wedding, Kathryn and I went away together on our first holiday, to Thailand. Even though we still didn’t know each other very well, it probably says a lot about younger people that we still managed to have a good time.

Military life places huge demands on even the most loving and established of marriages and relationships and here I was trying to get a new life off the ground with a woman I barely knew.

The army didn’t help the process. Not long after our brief holiday, I was sucked back into the normal routine of training exercises that are part of life in the defence force. I was sent to the Land Warfare Centre, the home of jungle training, in Canungra in southern Queensland, where my fellow soldiers and I learned how to fight the Vietnam War. I had already done jungle training in Malaysia and had just come from the deserts and villages of Afghanistan and, before that, the burned and cratered streets of Iraq. Nothing I did at Canungra seemed to be of any relevance or value to fighting the wars we were currently involved in.

Next, I found myself at Tully, in northern Queensland, patrolling through the Australian bush and digging holes in the ground. I had just been in Uruzgan Province where people had been calling in 500-pound bombs from fast mover jets, snatching and killing HVTs in the middle of the night in their mudbrick compounds, and dealing with the ever-present threat of IEDs, and now I was up to my waist in dirt, with an entrenching tool, a tiny shovel, in my hand, like I was in some trench in World War I.

I wanted to scream: ‘Are there no intelligent people here?’

I understood that with new guys coming into the battalion, fresh from training and eager to learn as I had once been, we had to keep on doing the same training we had always done, to make sure everyone was at the same level of skill and professionalism; however, so much of what we did now seemed irrelevant.

After the exercise at Tully was over, we came back to Enoggera Barracks and I went home to Kathryn. Since my trip to Afghanistan, I had moved out of the place at Strathpine and bought a house in the Brisbane suburb of Petrie. Kathryn's lease had come up for renewal and the owners had wanted to put the rent up, so she had moved into the house at Petrie, with me. It had seemed like a natural next step for us.

'I'm going back to Afghanistan again,' I told her.

'When?'

'Not for another eighteen months. The whole battalion's deploying as a group. We'll be in a proper infantry role, as mentors.'

We would be heading back in 2010, from February to October, as MTF-1, a Mentoring Task Force, with the mission of training the Afghan National Army to take a greater role in fighting the war against the Taliban.

'It'll be more dangerous,' she said.

We talked about what I might do after the 2010 trip. It was a question I had been giving some thought to. As much as I liked the army and realised it was a good fit for me, I had been thinking more and more about the future. If, as I assumed, Kathryn and I stayed together and ended up getting married, then I presumed we would have children.

Because my father had missed the first ten years of my life – and was hardly an influence for good on the remainder – I had made up my mind that if I ever had kids I would be there 100 per cent for them, and from what I already knew of service life, I knew that I could not be the parent I wanted to be if I was away for most of the child's life on operations or bullshit training exercises like the one I had just finished.

In my own mind, I had decided that if Kathryn got pregnant, I would put in my discharge papers the day after I received the news. As we had just been given notification that we were going back to Afghanistan, I resolved that if things went the way I thought they would between Kathryn and me, that I would do this one more deployment and then get out. By then, I would have been in the army for ten years, so I would be entitled to some long-service benefits as well.

I was twenty-five years old, living this somewhat disjointed life where I would just settle into something approaching domestic normality and then I would be off, living in the bush for weeks or months, on exercise.

Exhausted as I had been, I had also been on a high after that first Afghan deployment. I had seen the army at its most professional, stripped of bullshit and bureaucracy, and now I was back to reality. What was keeping me going, keeping me motivated, was the promise of more hardship in the future, of going back to a war-ravaged country and being away from my girlfriend for nearly a year. At the time, living this way all made sense to me, but looking back I wonder if it was inherently self-destructive and the worst foundation possible for a fledgling relationship.

FOURTEEN

We were patrolling through a village, F88 Steyr rifles up at the ready, sweating from the sun's bite and the weight of our helmets, body armour and combat vests. The explosion caught us all by surprise.

A man started screaming. 'I've lost my leg, I've lost my fucking leg!'

Lance Corporal Lukas Woolley ran to the casualty, dropped to his knees and found the wounded man's first-aid kit. You always use the casualty's kit, not your own, we had been told many times. If you were hit, then your own tourniquet and bandages would be used on you. This was so a dead or wounded man wasn't left with medical supplies and a live one without them.

Blood spurted from a torn artery, soaking Woolley's hands as he worked on the injured man, who continued to scream at the top of his voice. Rifles and a Minimi were firing around us as an enemy sniper started taking aim at our section and we went into a contact drill.

'Shit,' Woolley said, half a smile on his face as he looked up at me, 'this bloke really has lost his leg.'

It was no laughing matter, really, but it was only training. 6 RAR was in a series of full-blown Mission Rehearsal Exercises at High Range, near Townsville.

The man who had just been blown up by an IED was an actor and, as Woolley pointed out, he really was an amputee. People who had lost arms and legs had been recruited to play the part of casualties, their limbs covered in fake rubber wounds. There were tubes connected to the latex gore and when the actor pressed a concealed hand pump, imitation blood spurted out at us. It was incredibly realistic and designed to prepare us for the real thing.

As the ‘casualty’ was stabilised and the enemy vanquished, an instructor stepped in to call a halt to the exercise. Minutes earlier, he had been borderline boring us with a death-by-PowerPoint presentation in the lecture room, but not long after we’d filed out of the classroom, the ‘ambush’ had been sprung on us.

‘Listen up!’ We gathered around the instructor, a sergeant medic who had served in Afghanistan and Iraq. ‘The fastest and best way to deal with a combat casualty is to kill the enemy.’

This set of a fake Afghan village was the best and most realistic training I had ever participated in. One good thing about prolonged involvement in a real war was that the army was getting better at what we did, and how to prepare people for it. Better, that was, not perfect.

‘You are not supposed to be learning how to use a tourniquet, you are here to be assessed on how you use it!’ a warrant officer bellowed at us.

The fear of IEDs was real and justified. Later, in Afghanistan, I heard of guys in another company who went out on patrol with tourniquets pre-positioned loosely around each leg, ready to be tightened quickly if they were hit.

We were being issued new gear – pistols and holsters for all of us; Aimpoint red dot sights and night-aiming devices for our Steyrs; new style body armour; Surefire torches; and Multiband Inter/Intra Team Radios (MBITRs) along with personal role radios . . . it was all cool stuff, but half of it we’d never seen or used before.

We had done patrols by foot and by vehicle and, at one point, a huge charge had gone off next to the Bushmaster I was driving. We trained to do a vehicle recovery under fire and there was lots of honing and practising the skills we had learned. We learned how to dismount and search for IEDs – something I’d done when working with the SOTG on my tour of Afghanistan and Iraq – and what to do if our own vehicle was hit.

As with the first-aid exercise, the pre-deployment exercises were becoming more real and more focused on the job we would be doing in Afghanistan, training and mentoring the Afghans, and the location where we would be fighting.

We were also learning about the arms of the army who we would be serving alongside. The Mentoring Task Force would be an integrated battle group, with armour in the form of LAVs from a cavalry regiment and artillery. We learned how to extract a casualty from a burning armoured vehicle, how to get behind a 25-millimetre chain gun and open fire if the gunner had been hit, and how to call in artillery fire missions or air strikes if the JTAC had been killed. Much of the first-aid training focused on trauma and blast injuries, reflecting the sobering reality that, even more so since my time in-country, IEDs had become an even greater threat.

As we took a five-minute break, coloured smoke and the smell of burned explosives from a simulated IED hanging in the air, I reflected that I had been lucky to join the army when I did.

East Timor had been the first major Australian military deployment since the peacekeeping mission to Rwanda in 1994, and Somalia before that. I had rolled into 6 RAR just as they were about to be deployed to Timor and after September 11, I had seen the progression of war and terrorism in the Middle East from Iraq to Afghanistan. As I grew as a soldier, so too did the experience of my army, and so too did the scale of the threat against us. The time was ripe to explore the world as a soldier. I had been lucky enough to start off on an operation with very little threat – Timor – and then had a gradual introduction to combat in Iraq. My first deployment to Afghanistan had tested my physical and mental resilience through sheer hard work and I had been exposed to enemy fire on an almost continual basis. Now, however, we were going to be at the sharp end, alongside the Afghan Army, and there was little doubt that there would be serious action.

I wanted to go to Afghanistan as the commander of one of our platoon’s three infantry sections, the role I was almost qualified for. I was wearing the two-stripe rank on my uniform – by virtue of my experience, I’d been promoted to temporary corporal – but I’d only had time to do the first of the two courses required to make the rank substantive.

The platoon commander, Lieutenant James Fanning, called me into his office just before we left for Afghanistan.

‘An argument has been made,’ Fanning told me, ‘that you should be given a section, but it came down to a bit of bureaucracy and it’s not going to happen. You’re going to be the motorised corporal, in charge of the vehicles and the crews.’

I was disappointed. Just as in Iraq and my first tour of Afghanistan, I would once more be stuck in a bloody Bushmaster.

Fanning went on, trying to soften the blow. ‘The way I see the platoon structure, the vehicle crews constitute ten other people and I see them as my fourth manoeuvre section. Where we can secure ground by means other than the vehicles, I don’t see why we can’t have a fourth section on the ground. Obviously, we’ll only be able to suss it out once we’re on the ground.’

I tried to be stoic. ‘I don’t like it, don’t agree with it, but it is what it is and I’ll have to go with it.’

I had been annoyed at having to go through the motions of training at Canungra, and on Tandem Thrust again, and digging holes at Tully, and as downhearted as I was about once more being stuck in the PMV detachment, I was looking forward to going back to Afghanistan.

I said my goodbyes to Kathryn. Farewells are not something service families get used to, but they are part of life. At least on this trip, I would be entitled to ROCL and would spend it with Kathryn overseas somewhere.

We flew first to the United Arab Emirates, where we did more training. We zeroed our rifles, had more lessons in advanced first aid, and sat through presentations that brought us up to date with the latest situation in Afghanistan. Australia’s long-running streak of relative good luck had run out, we knew, and we had begun losing guys to enemy fire and IEDs.

I hadn’t realised, though, just how much things had changed until we heard from guys who had just been in-country, and until we arrived and I started driving those same roads that I’d driven with the SOTG just a couple of years before. It seemed like now the threat of IEDs was everywhere and you couldn’t drive more than ten metres without being worried.

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From the United Arab Emirates, we flew to TK, Tarin Kowt, the main Australian base in Uruzgan Province, in southern Afghanistan, in the back of the ubiquitous Hercules transport. As the ramp was lowered and we walked down, I had a sense of deja vu, except, of course, it was real as I had been in this very spot before. The snow-capped mountains towered in the background – so different to my own country, yet strangely familiar – and dust tinged with the scent of aviation fuel swirled around me.

Here we go again, I thought.

I was feeling positive. This was my job, my normal, and it seemed easier in some respects, more straightforward, to be getting down to the business of soldiering than frustrating peacetime exercises and negotiating the minefield of a new relationship.

As the commander and sometimes driver of a Bushmaster, I would be on convoy duty again, moving troops and providing protection for shipments of supplies to a string of small patrol bases the Australians had established through the Chora and Mirabad valleys.

Like wild-west forts on the American frontier, these outposts had been set up in what the US forces still referred to as ‘Indian Country’. The Australian strategy had been to dominate the province and keep the Taliban off balance and, ideally, out of the area, by continuous patrolling and a high-visibility presence not only in the provincial capital of Tarin Kowt, but in outlying villages and valleys as well.

We had been working in partnership with the Dutch, but they were in the process of pulling out of Afghanistan and scaling back their presence. This area had first been occupied on behalf of the coalition and the new Afghan government by A-teams, small twelve-hand detachments of US Special Forces, but they had been moved elsewhere. Now Australia was largely responsible for this troubled province on its own, although we could still call on US air support from the big base at Kandahar.

Our mission was changing, though, from one of being the dominant military force in the area to training the Afghan National Army and police to shoulder more of the burden for themselves. I’m sure the politicians in

Canberra thought that might make things safer for the Australians on the ground in Uruzgan, but they were about to be proven wrong.

I tried to look on the positive side of being back in the PMV detachment. Unlike other members of the task force, who were either based at one of the patrol bases or holed up in TK behind the wire in administrative and logistics jobs, my guys and I in our Bushmasters would be seeing a good deal of the province.

People had very different wars in Afghanistan. You could be out at a patrol base, being shot at nearly every day and facing the continuous risk of IEDs, with an occasional patchy phone call home on a satellite phone, or you could be back in TK, hanging out at a cafe, hitting the gym or surfing the net twenty-four hours a day, or even learning salsa dancing on the weekends.

I knew which I preferred. I couldn’t wait to get back out on the road.

*

Tarin Kowt had changed in one noticeable way. It still had the same dusty streets, the same dull tan-coloured buildings and crumbling architecture laced with loose-hanging electricity wires and pocked with fruit stalls shaded by ragged plastic. But there were more kids.

There seemed to be children everywhere, on their way to school, mostly boys, but here and there some girls. The IED threat had increased, but so, too, had the number of people going about their normal, peaceful business. There were some signs, at least, that our presence might be bringing stability and a return to what might have passed for normal or peaceful at some time in this country’s troubled history.

Roads that I remembered as being closed because of the high threat level or the ruined state of them were reopened – some of them had even been tarred. There were new hospitals and schools in the town, which accounted for the increase in kids. Afghans in turbans and traditional dress watched us pass, if not smiling and waving, then at least not spitting and giving us the finger.

As well as being the transport element, our PMV detachment was also a surge force – we drivers and vehicle commanders could be sent to a patrol base to add extra manpower and firepower if needed.

First time this happened, we were sent out to Patrol Base Atiq, a forlorn shithole of a place if ever there was one. Atiq was a rudimentary fort with Hesco walls and green canvas tents inside the small perimeter, and little else. It was set on a hill looking up the Mirabad Valley and it smelled of piss.

And true to Lieutenant James Fanning's word, the other drivers and crew and I were sent out on patrol as a section, with me in command. Our senses were heightened, our minds full of stories of IEDs, and our keenness honed by the fact that we'd not long been back in Afghanistan. I usually faced the threat of IEDs from the cupola of a Bushmaster, but now I was on foot.

Someone opened fire. From the sound of it, the bullets were coming from up ahead and across the river that the patrol base overlooked. My section was in the rear, not up front where the shooting was coming from.

For some of the guys, this was new, an adrenaline-inducing introduction to being shot at, but for me it was almost like coming home. My senses ratcheted up a notch or two and once the initial realisation that someone was shooting at me again passed, I felt a calm descend over me as I scanned the crops and compounds, and anywhere else a sniper might be hiding.

'Come on, come on,' I said to myself, willing one of the Taliban to show themselves and give me something to fire at.

A JTAC called for air support.

It was clear, now, as I'd first thought, that the gunmen were on the other side of the river from us. They were smart. They had harassed us, forced us to stop what we were doing – deploying troops on a patrol – simply by firing a couple of rounds at us. They knew that we could not cross the river in our vehicles to get to them, so they were safe, except from attack from the air.

A pair of US Army MH-6 Little Bird helicopters buzzed over us, swooping in like kites hunting snakes. These light observation helicopters, nicknamed the flying egg because of the shape of their fuselage, specialised in low-level assaults and reconnaissance.

The pilots were cowboys, literally. I’d seen a couple of them on the ground before, and they were loose, hillbilly types dressed in black stetsons, like Robert Duvall as Colonel Kilgore in *Apocalypse Now*. Some of them even wore spurs on their boots.

The choppers circled the lush fields like malevolent mosquitos. A crewman must have thought he saw something, because he leaned out and raked the green zone with a wild burst of automatic fire from his M4. Another popped a smoke grenade, but the Taliban had melted away.

*

On another patrol out of Atiq, the engineers had been checking the area and one of them discovered an IED.

The sappers had done a good job to detect the device as the pressure plate was made of wood, just a bit of offcut timber. The enemy were getting clever: they realised our metal detectors would pick up traditional components used in landmines and booby traps, so they were minimising their use of metal.

From what we had heard in our briefings our Special Forces guys, the SAS and commandos, had done a good job targeting the enemy’s HVTs and the Taliban’s leadership was in disarray. That didn’t stop the foot soldiers on the ground, though, from changing to the dirty tactics of improvised bombs and mines to directly target the Australians in the province.

There was a further delay to the day’s patrolling while we waited for an EOD guy to ready a charge, to blow the booby trap in place. I was in my Bushmaster.

‘Get down, take cover!’ screamed a senior NCO. He was looking directly at me as I stood in the vehicle’s cupola. ‘Take cover!’

‘Mate,’ I felt like saying to him, ‘I’m in an armoured vehicle 300 metres from the blast. Nothing is going to happen to me.’ I shook my head as he buried his in the dirt. It was clear he had never been outside the wire; this was his first operational deployment. There was a flash and a boom as the lethal device was rendered safe.

*

While the PMV detachment gave me the chance to travel the province, I was still hankering for an opportunity to command a section on foot full time, patrolling, looking for a fight.

Instead, I was flown to Kandahar with a couple of other guys to oversee the arrival and preparation of a fleet of new Bushmasters to replace the ones in-country, which were showing signs of wear. We knew those vehicles inside and out and our job was to install the specialised equipment the Bushmasters would need to operate and survive in Afghanistan. We fitted radio stacks, wiring and electronic countermeasure aerials – designed to disrupt the remote-controlled detonation of IEDS – to the trucks. It was a job that had taken guys a day to do, per vehicle, in the past, but we were so proficient we could knock over a Bushmaster in about four hours. We were there for three weeks and in our spare time we smashed it in the well-equipped gym then rewarded ourselves with fast food at the takeaway joints on base. There were only a handful of Australians on the base, so none of the Yanks really knew nor cared who we were or what we were up to.

It was like a bit of mini-leave, within the tour, and nothing like the frenetic pace of the tour I had done with the SOTG. Even though I'd been shot at on a regular enough basis, that first half of my 2010 deployment to Afghanistan was shaping up to be pretty cruisy.

My detachment was staying in the big American transit lines area, which could accommodate thousands of people if needed, but for now it was just four of us.

I was working out next to one of the guys, chatting as I lifted weights. 'I can't believe people get paid to do this in a war zone. We're getting the same pay as the boys out patrolling the war zone. We're in aircon every day, getting fed every night.'

‘Yeah,’ he replied. ‘Now if only they could make the lettuce in the mess taste like real food, it would be paradise.’

‘What am I going to eat tomorrow?’ I pondered out loud. We had little to complain about.

My virtual leave turned into real leave and I flew out of Afghanistan for Los Angeles, where I would meet up with Kathryn.

*

I caught a military transport to Dubai, then a civilian flight to Los Angeles, and checked into the hotel where Kathryn and I would be staying. I crashed out.

Although the operational tempo had not been as hectic as my first tour, I was out like a light and woke to the sound of someone banging on the hotel room door. I opened the door and saw Kathryn, who had taken a shuttle from the airport and had been trying for some time to rouse me. It wasn’t the most romantic reunion of all time.

It was surreal, leaving the threat and risk of Afghanistan, where I was always carrying a rifle or a pistol, and then being on Rodeo Drive staring at people who were so totally removed and unaware of the chaos going on in the rest of the world while they shopped.

We hired a car, planning on doing a road trip up the Pacific Coast, and then out to Las Vegas, but I was unsettled, still keyed up from having come straight from Afghanistan and the continual threat of driving over an IED. Kathryn also seemed uneasy.

‘I’m stressed,’ she said as we drove. ‘I’ve been really concerned about you on this trip.’

I tried to reassure her, telling her that the first half of the tour had been comparatively easy. She knew I would rather have been commanding a section on foot, where I would have been in even more danger, but we glossed over that.

I was trying to reconnect with Kathryn after months away, but at the same time I couldn’t stop thinking of the rest of my team – how they were, what they were doing, were they in harm’s way? Even in America, on holiday, I was still invested in Afghanistan, not in the mission or the politics, but in my mates.

At the same time, it was liberating to be away from the army, even if only for a short period. I could get out of bed when I wanted to, stay out late, have a drink and do normal things. Little things took on a new significance, like the act of looking at the little green man at traffic lights, waiting for permission to cross the road, instead of barrelling along a dusty track looking for places where a roadside bomb might be hidden.

It was hard to relax completely, because at the back of my mind, always, were thoughts about the guys who were still over there, and the knowledge that I would have to go back.

We stopped at a restaurant for lunch, on the way to Las Vegas. The waitress took us to a table in the centre of the room.

‘Sorry, Dan doesn’t like sitting in the middle,’ Kathryn said to the waitress, ‘he won’t be comfortable there. Can we have a table in the corner?’

Kathryn had picked up on the subtle changes in my behaviour as well.

Another time, as we were driving, a police car came up behind me, closing the gap so that it was right up our arse. I thought I needed to turn right up ahead, but wasn’t sure if I could, so instead I veered off the road into a shopping centre car park. The police car cruised past me slowly, the officer giving me a death stare. I hadn’t done anything wrong, but it rattled me.

At a service station, the first time I had to fill up, I put the nozzle of the fuel pump in the tank and pressed the lever, but nothing happened. There was a woman on the opposite side of me, filling her car.

‘Excuse me,’ I said to her.

She just glared at me, giving me a look that said, *How dare you speak to me?* ‘What do you want?’ she finally said.

‘How do you get the pump to work?’

‘You need to go inside and pay for it,’ she said, in the voice of a teacher addressing the class dumbass.

‘I’m sorry, I don’t understand, I’m Australian.’ I worked out that I needed to pay before the pump would start working. I got back in the car with Kathryn, exasperated. ‘Fuck, I thought that woman was about to shoot me.’

We drove to Sonoma, a lovely historic town in a winemaking region and it should have been a time for us to reconnect and unwind. Kathryn got online to check Facebook for the first time on the trip and came across some terrible news.

I got online as well and we learned that two engineers serving with MTF-1, Sappers Jacob Moerland and Darren Smith, had lost their lives to an IED. Darren was a dog handler and his dog, Herbie, had also been killed in the blast.

The news didn’t help our moods – Kathryn knew a woman whose husband was doing the same job as those who had been killed and I found myself again thinking of Afghanistan. I wasn’t itching to get away from Kathryn, or for my leave to end, but there was no question of me not going back and now I was thinking even more about the risks the others were facing while I was enjoying myself.

America was a country of amazing contrasts. I saw people in designer clothes and fancy cars, so perfect they looked fake, like they were on a movie set, and more homeless people and crappy old unroadworthy vehicles than I’d thought possible.

The country seemed very proud of its veterans, with preference given to service people and their families in queues, and with discounts in stores, and then I came across a guy on the street wearing his medal ribbons, raising money for homeless veterans.

Once in Vegas, we stayed at the MGM Grand and had a good time, hitting the tables, buying some clothes, having a few drinks, and then it was time to go. I was ready, but Kathryn wasn’t.

We went to LAX and had to leave via different terminals. Kathryn was complaining, half-jokingly, that she would have to carry home all the extra clothes and shoes I had bought in the States in her baggage.

‘I don’t want you to go back,’ she said to me.

It was my twenty-seventh birthday that day and there was no question of me not returning to Afghanistan and, more importantly, to my mates.

FIFTEEN

Things had changed by the time I got back to TK. When I returned, I found some other guys had moved into the lines where I had been staying. My gear had been bundled unceremoniously into a corner of the room and picked over – when I checked it, I found someone had helped themselves to a pair of sunglasses and my collection of dodgy pirated DVDs.

My unit, Combat Team Delta – based around Delta Company – and Combat Team Alpha had so far been confined to TK for the first half of the tour, but that was about to change. The 100 members of Delta were being sent out into the wilds of Afghanistan, because our mission had changed.

The 2010 fighting season, when the Taliban traditionally liked to leave their fields and wage war, had been particularly brutal and Australian losses were mounting. Our blokes had been taking the fight to the enemy, but the politicians back in Australia were getting nervous. They were looking for an exit strategy and it seemed that the best way to leave Afghanistan with honour would be to try to further ramp up our development of the Afghan National Army into a force that could carry the brunt of the war.

What the pollies didn't realise was that moving us into that role would be like taking us out of the frying pan and dropping us in the fire. Combat Team Delta was headed for an untamed part of Uruzgan where few in the coalition had dared to tread in the past.

Like the Australians, the Dutch had also been taking more casualties than their government was comfortable with. As a result, the Dutch were accelerating their withdrawal from the hot areas, leaving us to take up the slack in the patrol bases where they had been operating.

I returned to an air of excitement. There was shit being packed up everywhere. Everything from weapons and ammunition to gym equipment was being loaded on to eight-tonne trailers for shipment out to a string of remote forts that we would be taking over.

Our PMV detachment would be broken up, with our Bushmasters no longer centrally located at TK anymore. Instead, they would be farmed out to support the various new patrol bases.

As well as having been away at Kandahar, out of the game for a while, I now found myself adrift in the company structure, a swinging dick at platoon headquarters. I was a spare corporal with no section and no Bushmasters to command. One of our sergeants had been sent back to Australia. I never found out the real reason, so I was also covering the platoon sergeant's position, a rank above mine.

Lieutenant Fanning, who'd had to break the news to me before we left Australia that I was not going to get a section of my own, again called me to his office.

He told me that as the Bushmasters were no longer going to be a separate manoeuvre element, he had made the pitch to his superiors that I should go out to one of the patrol bases as mentor for Afghan National Army NCOs – non-commissioned officers.

'I know you're no great fan of them,' Fanning said, as I had made no secret of what I thought of the Afghan National Army up until that point, 'but this is your chance to have a big impact.'

Short of getting my own section, this was what I wanted, to be out in the field, on foot, on patrol. 'It's a great gig,' I said to him, 'and it'll keep me with the boys, so I'm in.'

I was under no illusions about the job or the seriousness of what we were about to do. Three days after my birthday, three Australian commandos died when the US Army Black Hawk helicopter they were flying in crashed.

On 9 July 2010, 6 RAR lost its first soldier when Private Nathan Bewes died in an IED explosion. Our luck had run out, but we still had a job to do.

*

Combat Team Delta moved out to its new homes, Patrol Bases Hadrian, Razak, and Anar Juy.

At Hadrian, the Americans had arrived just ahead of us, having replaced the Dutch who had already pulled out. It was a bit of a shit fight, with not enough room for everyone, and we camped there while waiting to hear where we would go next.

‘There’s no script for this,’ Lanno, Sergeant Sean Lanigan, said to me. Lanno had a shaved head and the look of a hardarse, but he was an educated, cultured guy with a taste for alternative music. He was a professional soldier but would have been just as happy lying in a hammock reading on a beach somewhere as he was in Afghanistan taking on a new mission – maybe more so. ‘We don’t even know if we can make this plan work, or how we’re going to be resupplied or what.’

It was like making policy on the run, on the one hand exciting, and on the other worrying. Lieutenant Fanning gave us a pep talk about the importance of the mission we were all about to embark on.

‘This is their country,’ Fanning said of our Afghan counterparts, ‘their war, and as long as it meets our risk thresholds, we’ll be out there with them, fighting it. We’ll be operating with small teams of Afghans in a true partnering role. In order to establish credibility as a force they are going to respect, we need to prove ourselves. We need to build a reputation like that of our forebears, as ferocious fighters, but also morally and ethically sound. We’ll be living alongside the Afghans, eating with them, playing cricket with them. What we are doing is a massive step forward for their government.’

Some other guys pushed out to Anar Juy in the Tangi Valley, a smaller outpost occupied on the fringe of coalition country, to do a recce (reconnaissance patrol). We soon got the word to join them, but it was so remote we had trouble finding it. No engineers had improved or tarred the road out there; in fact, we lost the road a couple of times and just bashed through the desert. Someone gave Anar Juy a nickname as soon as we caught our first glimpse of the place.

‘It looks like a pirate ship.’

And it did: like a little wooden galleon, riding the crest of a wave of dirt and rock. The ramshackle affair had a shipmate, the Afghan National Army outpost, located close by but separate, and the two parts of the forward operating base overlooked a river and a green zone of cultivation between it and the village of Derapet.

Occupying the main base were thirteen French soldiers and this was as remote and lonely an outpost as anything any novelist could have conjured up of a Foreign Legion fort in the old days in the Sahara Desert.

I had been assigned to Anar Juy as a mentor. My job would be to work with the Afghans, accompanying them on patrol, so I was eager to get the lie of the land.

First, we had a tour of the small base. The fortifications were a perimeter of earth-filled Hescos that had seen better days. Bits of tin and timber had been laid over the top to create sleeping areas, with sandbags chucked on top. We learned that the French force was rotated in and out, with each contingent staying only two weeks at a time. Perhaps as a result the occupants didn't seem to care too much about their living conditions; there was the smell of urine where guys had simply pissed against the Hesco walls.

'This is going to be a bit rough,' one of the guys observed, but when we passed through the French eating area, he nudged an empty wine bottle lying on the ground.

'Boys have been kicking back, having a few reds every night,' another digger said. 'At least the Frenchies go to war in style.' By contrast, Australian forces in Afghanistan were dry, alcohol-free.

Up on top, like the bridge and prow of the pirate ship, were a couple of flat-roofed timber and sandbag lookout towers, with aerials and a flagpole jutting out. The French tricolour hung limply in the midday heat.

I climbed up, along with an NCO. 'Do you do much patrolling?' I asked the French corporal.

He shrugged. 'Not so much. We are very lightly armed, with just one 7.62-millimetre machine gun.'

He nodded below us to the sight of our guys starting to lug in our arsenal from the vehicles. In contrast to the French, we were armed to the teeth, with a .50-calibre heavy machine gun, a Mark 19 40-millimetre grenade launcher and MAG58s. Lanno, who was to be one of my fellow mentors, was also a sniper and he was armed with the fearsome Barrett .50-calibre anti-materiel rifle. It had theoretically been designed to destroy stuff – matériel – but, in reality, made a mess of people. In addition, we had our own armoured support, in the form of three LAVs – two gun cars, armed with 25-millimetre chain guns, and a PC, a personnel carrier with a .50-cal.

The Afghan National Army contingent next door were not much better armed than the French soldiers, though they had an old Dooshka, a DShK 12.7-millimetre machine gun, the Russian equivalent of our .50-calibre, and a 107-millimetre recoilless rifle of similar vintage, probably dating back to the war between the mujahedin (Islamist guerrilla fighters) and the Soviets.

Our mentoring force was smaller than a regular infantry platoon, but we had our own officer in command, Lieutenant Fanning, who, along with Lanno and me, was one of the mentors. Our call sign was Papa four-two. The words ‘call sign’ referred to a combination of words, numbers and letters used to identify an individual sub-unit over the radio, and also as a collective noun for our group.

With us, in support, was Corporal Adam Marsh and the rest of his section; an engineer brick of four guys commanded by Corporal Joel Toms; an artillery bombardier as a JTAC; a signaller named Toby Hering and an intelligence corps guy. The LAV vehicle crews made up the rest of the Aussies.

The French corporal pointed out toward the village of Derapet. ‘We go down the hill most days with the Afghans, about 500 metres, and set up a VCP this side of the river, then come back.’

I nodded, keeping to myself my thoughts that manning a vehicle check point in the same location every day was hardly the way to disrupt the enemy or dominate an area of operations. The corporal had a point, however, in that if they did stir up a hornet’s nest of Taliban, they were barely equipped to hold off even a small-scale attack.

‘Whatever you do,’ he said to me, pointing to a line on the map and then gesturing beyond the village, ‘do not go past the 42nd easting, the longitude, you understand?’

I scanned the village through binoculars. ‘Why not?’

He smiled. ‘You cross that line and you will be shot at.’

That was kind of the point of us being there, I had thought, but again I kept my mouth shut. It was not my business to criticise a bunch of guys who had been left dangling out here like bait.

I climbed down from the tower and found Lieutenant Fanning, who had been talking to a French officer.

‘Did you hear this shit about not crossing the 42nd easting?’ I asked him.

He nodded. ‘We’re here now. The Afghans I’ve spoken to are champing at the bit to do something, but they haven’t had a partner force that’s been able to do that.’

‘Does that mean we’re not going there?’ I asked him.

‘Fuck that.’ Fanning grinned at me. ‘We’re going to poke the bear.’

That sounded just fine to me.

*

Space was at a premium and while the French were still there, we Aussies camped outside the fort, sleeping between our vehicles. Even once the French had left, it would still be a tight squeeze. To accommodate all twenty-six of us, we had to rig up bunk beds in the sleeping area, with little more than thirty centimetres of headroom between each mattress – the interior of the Pirate Ship was starting to look more like a submarine. Our small detachment of engineers, whose job it would be to search for IEDs, knocked up their own sleeping area and one of the guys elected to sleep up on the roof under the stars each night, on top of the tin, timber and sandbags that supposedly counted as ‘hardened’ protection for those of us inside.

There was a cold room rigged up in a half-length shipping container, for our fresh rations, though we had worked out from the start that resupply would be a patchy affair.

Facilities were basic. We had pissaphones, tubes half buried into the ground for urinating, and we shat on portable commodes into plastic bags which were then tossed in a bin, doused with diesel and burned each day. I still associate Anar Juy with the smell of greasy, burning shit.

In their own fort fifty metres from ours were our twenty-five Afghan soldiers and with the aid of an interpreter I set about learning what I could about them and assessing their level of training.

I would have to draw on everything I learned during training and my operational experience if I was going to help these guys.

I formed them up and, with the interpreter, I put them through a bit of weapons drill, explaining the degrees of weapon readiness, and what to do in case of a stoppage.

‘Load!’ I called out, giving them the command to check the safety catch on their rifle and attach a magazine. Some carried the drill out correctly and safely, some didn’t.

It soon became apparent from their drills that most of them were very new to the Afghan National Army. Although they were inexperienced, that didn’t mean they were strangers to danger. These men had already been out in the field, some had come under fire, and all of them had dealt with the threat of IEDs.

As the senior mentor, Lieutenant Fanning, in consultation with his Afghan counterpart, decided that two days after we arrived, we would go out on patrol with the Afghans. The Afghan officer wanted it to be a night patrol.

We did a rehearsal during the day, working out the formation we would use on the patrol, and tried to organise the Afghans as best as we could. It was chaotic, but they were keen and ready to go. The Afghan commander addressed us via his interpreter and spoke at length about the reputation of the Australian soldiers and how he and his men looked forward to working with us.

That evening we geared up – I was carrying forty-two kilograms, including my rifle, ammunition, grenades, radios, water, helmet, body armour, first-aid kits and Ninox NVGs – night-vision goggles. Our ability to see at night gave us an advantage over the Taliban, although we would be operating in an unfamiliar environment.

I was excited. While I had patrolled on foot in East Timor, I had not seen any action there and most of my other experience on operations, in Iraq and Afghanistan, had been in vehicles and dealing with the threat of IEDs. Those of us in the PMV detachment had done a couple of foot patrols in Iraq and at Atiq when we had been the surge force in the first half of this tour, but the only time I had ever fired my weapon in anger had been from the cupola of the Bushmaster. This was potentially the first time that I would actually close with the enemy on foot in a traditional infantry role.

Even though we had our NVGs, I privately questioned the wisdom of doing a night patrol as our first outing with the Afghans, but that's what they wanted. The idea, of course, was to let the enemy know that from now on we would be in his backyard, active at any time of the day, but for a first patrol, daylight would have been easier. In the relative cool of night, we lined them up and walked along their ranks, inspecting them.

I stopped in front of one man and beckoned to the interpreter. The soldier in front of me carried an early model American M16 rifle, loaded with one twenty-round magazine of ammunition. ‘Ask him if that's all he's got? Where's the rest of his ammo and gear?’

The interpreter translated my words and then gave me the reply. ‘He says that is all he has, all he needs.’

I looked to the Afghan platoon commander and he had nothing to add. I had often thought we were overburdened with gear, but this was ridiculous.

The next man was wearing a camouflaged US body armour vest but when I reached out and prodded it, my finger pressed the fabric against his sternum. The front pocket of the vest was empty – there was nothing in it to stop a bullet.

‘Tell him to turn around.’ The interpreter relayed the order and the man did an about face. When I checked the rear of his vest, I found that he had also removed the Kevlar bulletproof back plate.

‘What's he done with the armour plates?’ I asked. The man replied.

‘He say they are too heavy, make him too hot to wear,’ the interpreter said.

I shook my head.

The next man had a Russian RPG-7 rocket-propelled grenade launcher resting between his legs and, reassuringly, two spare rockets in a homemade carrier on his back. I nodded to him. ‘Good.’

‘RPG good!’ the soldier said, nodding back at me and grinning.

I had no idea where he’d heard that, but he sounded enthusiastic. ‘Yes, mate, RPG good.’

‘RPG good!’ he said again and gave me a thumbs up.

As I checked a few more guys, I noticed that a couple had bloodshot eyes and swayed a little as they stood there. I’d heard that drug use – marijuana and heroin – was not uncommon in the Afghan National Army and I wondered if we were going out into the night with half-stoned men with guns. I thought of Ian Kelly showing me how to roll a six-paper joint and telling me it might come in handy one day.

Lieutenant Fanning, via the interpreter and the Afghan officer, gave the order for us to move out and into the night. It was ten o’clock by the time we were ready to go.

We left the FOB and the lead elements had pushed out down to the base of the hill, about 100 metres from the gate, when it became apparent that the Afghan commander had not cocked his M16. He had been carrying it, casually, balanced on his shoulder and, apparently, as he brought it down and pulled on the cocking handle, he must have had his finger through the trigger guard, because as soon as he chambered a round, the rifle went off.

Fanning had been walking next to him and a burst of three rounds flew right past Fanning’s torso, straight into the ground in front of him.

I was nearby, but everyone’s first instinct was that we were taking fire, so guys dropped to the ground.

‘ND, ND!’ Fanning said over our internal radio, telling us it had been a negligent discharge, an accident. ‘Everything’s okay, everyone’s all good.’ Fanning did a good job keeping his cool, although he had just nearly been killed. He and the Afghan officer were giving each other the thumbs up.

I silently wondered if maybe the fire had been deliberate, a means of the Afghans letting their Taliban mates in the village know that we were on our way.

Lanno came over to me, checking everyone was okay. ‘Fuck, mate, what have we got ourselves into?’

Feeling even more on edge, we set off again, down the hill to the river that separated Anar Juy from the village of Derapet. Even though it was August, late summer, the water that rushed over my boots and soaked my camouflage fatigues below the knees was chilly.

While the Australian Army had issued soldiers serving in Afghanistan desert camouflage uniforms in shades of pale grey, off-white and light brown, most of the fighting was done in the green zones, around villages, so we wore our normal darker uniforms that had been designed for the Australian bush.

As we passed through orchards and skirted irrigated fields of corn, I heard the *tucker-tucker-tucker* of a diesel-powered water pump somewhere nearby. As we approached the village, we could see cones of light here and there where a villager had a generator or perhaps a couple of solar panels to keep a bulb going in the darkness. Where there was light, groups of men clustered and drank tea or smoked and chatted. This frugal appreciation of electricity, something most people in a country like Australia take for granted, reminded me of my childhood.

When we emerged from the shadows, the locals were surprised but smiled and were outwardly friendly. I wondered what they really made of these heavily armed and armoured newcomers to their valley. I was sure word would soon get around, if it hadn’t already, that the French were gone and things were changing.

We melted back into the darkness, the two lead Afghan scouts navigating us through a rabbit warren of laneways between houses, family compounds in fact, made of mudbrick and straw, the design unchanged for centuries.

We heard a low growl and one of the Afghans swore and threw a rock. Moving up, I saw it was a dog, a big fucker, roaming free, with no ears or tail. It bared its fangs at us, growling again, as we filed past.

The patrol took a different way back to base, once more moving through the cultivated fields. As my boots squelched through the mud, I could also smell human shit from where a farmer had added some cheap fertiliser. We splashed through an aqueduct, not just a trench full of water, but rather a minor engineering marvel. It consisted of a series of hand-dug channels designed to bring snowmelt from the hills and mountains down to the green zone. It was an intricate network of many levels controlled with sluice gates made of wood. Back at Lowmead, Cowboy had been able to borrow a bulldozer to make our dam on the property, but the Afghans used their hands to tame the melting snow. I swear those people could make water run uphill if they tried. The green zones these channels irrigated were like oases in the desert, thick with figs and crops – and, of course, drugs.

My father had nothing on these guys – the plantation here stretched for acres around us. I smiled to myself . . . if Dad could see me now! I remembered my young self, lugging buckets of water from the dam to water Cowboy's comparatively few measly plants, and couldn't help but compare our efforts to this impressive irrigation network and full-scale drug crop.

They were resourceful here. I had noticed a man earlier in the village whose sandals were held together with a bit of wire. Westerners live in a disposable society, but the Afghans wasted nothing, even the shrapnel in their IEDs was recycled – old rusted nuts and bolts, even broken pieces of cutlery.

Some westerners wrote these people off as primitive or backwards, but they were neither. As well as mastering their harsh environment, they had seen off one of the world's greatest military empires and were now having a pretty good crack at the other one.

We returned to Anar Juy in the early hours of morning, before the dawn and got our heads down for some sleep.

No shots had been fired – at least not in anger – but the game around the village of Derapet had just changed.

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We quickly settled into a routine.

Our plan was that every couple of days we would do a patrol, by day or night, and in between we would work with the Afghans, conducting training.

We infantry guys would take the Afghan soldiers through TOETs – tests of elementary training – making sure they knew how to correctly strip and assemble their weapons, and how to safely load, unload and carry them. The actions of their officer on the first night had shown us they needed some help.

Fanning continued to play the role of the diplomat. One morning, shots rang out from the Afghan fort and some of the bullets sailed past our watchtower. Fanning headed over to our neighbours, striding so quickly and purposefully that the guys reckoned they could see little puffs of dust from each of his footsteps. He asked what had been going on and it turned out the Afghans on duty had been taking pot shots at birds, trying to supplement their rations. Fanning suggested politely, but firmly, that if they wanted to carry on with their turkey shoot that they did not point their weapons in our direction.

Another evening, the Afghans decided to test fire their museum-piece Russian 107-millimetre recoilless rifle, a smoothbore small artillery piece that first entered service in 1954. The guys loaded it and there was an almighty bang as the weapon itself blew up.

A few of us were there to watch and we rushed to check on the crew. The round had apparently misfired and exploded in the barrel, blowing a chunk of steel outwards and ruining the weapon. Of more concern was the Afghan soldier, lying burned and crying beside the recoilless rifle.

‘*Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar*,’ he yelled, meaning ‘God is great’. He spoke some more to his comrades, a look of fear mixed with solemn resignation in his eyes.

‘What’s he saying?’ I asked the interpreter.

‘He says he is going to die,’ the man translated, ‘that he is in god’s hands now.’

‘No, mate,’ I said, ‘tell him he’s going to be okay; we’ll get a chopper for him.’

The Afghan soldier was injured quite badly; he had received serious burns and taken some shrapnel from the explosion and bits of the recoilless rifle, but I was sure he was not going to die. The man continued writhing and moaning and invoking his god’s name.

Bones, our medic, rushed up, carrying his first-aid pack, and someone else had the stretcher. Bones pushed his way through the gathering crowd. ‘Tell him to fucking shut up and stop moving about.’

‘Dude,’ I said to interpreter, slightly more diplomatically, ‘tell him to lie on the stretcher and be still.’

We carried him to the RAP, the small regimental aid post Bones had set up in the Pirate Ship. The medic started to work on the soldier, cutting away his uniform, picking out bits of burned cloth embedded in his skin, cleaning him and applying dressings to his deeper wounds.

A casevac, a US Army Black Hawk casualty evacuation helicopter, was called and as it approached, we carried the Afghan on the stretcher out to the bare patch of rocky ground outside the base that served as our landing zone.

Two weeks later, the soldier was back with us, fit for duty. But I had been amazed and intrigued by the Afghans’ fatalistic approach to life in general, and to one of their own comrades. Without us and an evacuation chopper on standby, it could have been a very different outcome and they had all seemed resigned to that and accepting of it.

It highlighted a difference between them and us, but the other thing the incident did was cement a bond of trust and respect between us and the Afghans. It felt like they were truly on board with us, now that they knew they could count on us if things went bad, and that the resources of the coalition, like the Black Hawk, were not there just for us.

*

Our engineers took their Afghan counterparts out, showing them how to use their Minelab detectors and to search for IEDs using bayonets in the ground. We had not yet encountered any IEDs, but we all knew that they followed soldiers. There hadn't been a strong coalition presence in the valley for some time, so there had been no need, lately, for the enemy to be seeding the landscape with bombs just for the hell of it.

We were in no doubt, however, that the evil devices would make a return, as they had certainly been there in the past. About 500 metres from us was a prominent landmark known as IED Hill, because it was there that a Dutch vehicle had rolled over a landmine and five soldiers had been killed. That incident had helped precipitate the Dutch withdrawal from the valley.

When I had been based at TK, and then Kandahar, during the first half of the tour, I'd had good internet connection most of the time and Kathryn and I had been in regular contact. We'd settled into a routine of our own, where I would set my alarm super early so that I could get up and use the internet, before everyone else got on and clogged it up, and Kathryn and I would talk and wave to each other on Skype or, as a default, chat on Facebook Messenger. I hadn't had much to report.

All that changed when we shipped out to Anar Juy. Here, all we had was a handheld satphone and the coverage in the valley was shit.

'How are you?' she yelled into the phone.

'I'm fine.'

'What?'

'I'm fine!'

'I can't hear you,' she said, her voice garbled and staticky.

'All good!'

It would have been frustrating for her, I knew, that during the period when I would be most at risk, our contact would be less than it had been so far in this or any other time I'd been away.

Like the French, we would also sometimes set up vehicle checkpoints and conduct daytime high-visibility patrols. We would enter the village and, with the Afghans, check inside some of the family compounds. Inside we would find sheep, chooks, birds and people sleeping among their livestock.

We would alternate the time of day we set off, sometimes early in the morning, and at other times in the afternoons. Mornings were better, as we'd return to the Pirate Ship before the heat of the day bit.

In between patrols and training the Afghans, we whiled away our time as best as we could, reading, playing cards and working out. Our homemade gym resembled something you'd see in a prison yard, with weights made out of old tins filled with cement.

Every night we maintained a security picket manning the .50-calibre machine gun and a thermal imaging camera in the tower on the roof, with someone else downstairs on the command post radio.

The gun was manned 24/7 and the radio could also be monitored from the tower. On 20 August, Fanning called everyone to come up to the tower, the one place big enough for him to deliver important news to all of us at the same time.

He passed on the word that the 6 RAR family had lost two more of its own. Privates Thomas Dale, aged twenty-one, and Grant Kirby, aged thirty-five and a father of two, had been killed by an IED. Their mobile call sign had been parked on top of a hill, overlooking a village, and in between pickets Dales and Kirbs had decided to do an impromptu work-out. When they dropped to the dirt in a push-up competition, they set off the device. Scott Magennis, who I'd served with in Iraq and on my first tour of Afghanistan, was their section commander and he was also injured in the blast.

We set off a hand flare into the sky to mourn the passing of our friends – our brothers.

The Taliban spotters from the village watched us, no doubt, and waited for our next move.

SIXTEEN

‘We’re going into Derapet, just us, Aussies only,’ Fanning said, the following day.

We had been at Anar Juy for a couple of weeks and the next day, 22 August, we planned on taking a look past the 42nd easting. All of us remembered what the Frenchmen had said about crossing that invisible line on the map.

‘My intent is to move that line,’ Fanning said, as he gave his orders for the patrol. ‘We are going to take the fight to the enemy. The Afghans should not have the enemy telling them where they can and can’t go. They need to be able to reopen this valley and another route to TK.’

His plan was that we would push through or around the village, but we would stay within direct-fire reach of Victor One-One, our call sign of two LAVs with their 25-millimetre canons, commanded by Captain Tim Hurley. The vehicles would be positioned on a narrow spur, a finger-shaped ridge that pointed out from the Pirate Ship, allowing them to cover us with observation and fire.

Fanning, Sergeant Lanigan and I, the mentors, were all going, along with Corporal Adam Marsh’s section. Lance Corporal Lukas Woolley, who had been surprised to encounter the guy with one leg during training, was the section’s second-in-command and each of the section’s two ‘bricks’ of four men had a machine gun – Tommy Miranda with a 5.56-millimetre F89 Minimi, and Parks, another of the privates, with the heavier MAG58 7.62-millimetre gun. Also with us was our bombardier JTAC, who could call up fire support if we needed it, and Toby, the sig. We were a pretty heavy force and ready, so we thought, for whatever we might stir up.

Hurley’s armoured vehicles moved out, driving along the spur to get in position, and we set off on foot. Although we left in the morning, it was warm moving at any time, burdened as we were with gear.

We crossed the river and moved through the green zone with Private Paul Langer up-front as the scout. I looked out to my left, the barrel of my Steyr following my eyesight, and saw an old farmer, bent and digging in his field. He might have only been fifty years old, but in this hard land he looked eighty. I’d known some self-styled hard men in the Queensland bush, but these were tough people.

We entered the village and all seemed fine. There were kids running around, dressed in torn clothes and grubby sandals, playing and chasing each other, and the womenfolk retreated demurely into the cool, dark interiors of the compounds as we approached, out of our sight. That was all good. We would only worry if we saw women and children leaving a village in droves.

Some of the kids stopped to gawk at us and I reached into a pouch and handed out some pens and crayons, which went down a treat.

We skirted around the village and found an aqueduct to walk along, the best way of minimising the chances of tripping an IED. It’s possible to plant a mine or homemade bomb in a drainage ditch, but it needs to be waterproofed, which takes time and effort.

We waded on through cold water that sloshed between our knees and balls, then Fanning ordered us to change our direction of march. The patrol swung hard to the right, out of the water and through an older, deserted part of the village.

We were moving in an open formation and I was a way back at the rear, Arse-end Arnold carrying the extra burden of the ECM pack. The electronic countermeasures gear sent out signals to jam the remote signals that were used to detonate IEDs. The Taliban used the same remotes to set off bombs that we would use to open a garage door.

I heard gunfire but couldn’t see what was happening; mudbrick buildings obscured my view ahead.

‘Contact front!’

The word came back down the line to me as we all sought cover. ‘Two enemy, AK-47s.’

‘Assault forward!’ Sean Lanigan fired off half a magazine on full-automatic somewhere up ahead.

As the tail-end man, my job was to cover the rear, which in this contact meant I may as well not have been there at all. It was frustrating, but I used the time to think about how I might respond, how I might mobilise the section-plus into an attack if I was calling the shots. As with my previous experiences, the gunfire didn’t scare me, it heightened my senses and presented a problem to be solved.

Some of our guys started pushing around to the left, trying to outflank the two enemy who had fired at us, or been fired on.

There was a series of muffled bangs and the *whoosh* and *crack* of something breaking the sound barrier over my head.

‘What the fuck was that?’ I asked myself as I dutifully covered our rear.

It took me a moment to realise that Victor One-One’s LAVs were opening up with their 25-millimetre canons, searching for targets. It was exhilarating. Even though the rounds could have been fifteen metres over my head, I found myself involuntarily ducking as each salvo flew toward its target.

I heard the *bloop* of a 40-millimetre grenade leaving the launch tube fixed under someone’s Steyr. Shortly afterward came the *boom* of the explosive projectile detonating, followed by another blast.

The gunfire petered out and I was able to find out what had happened. Our forward scouts had seen two Taliban with AK-47s. The enemy had fired a couple of shots and then fucked off, though it wasn’t 100 per cent clear who had fired first.

The Taliban had picked an unoccupied area to deliver their first warning to us, and the fact that the women and children of Derapet had still been on the streets as we passed through meant that the enemy had not intended to bring on a full-pitch battle.

We pulled back to Anar Juy, wondering what the enemy would do next.

We knew they watched us, and we could often listen in on their radio calls that told us they were monitoring our movements. They knew when we were leaving the base and although all of us scanned the hills by day and at night whenever we were on picket, using the thermal imaging sight, we never could see their spotters hiding in the hills.

The French had been right about the 42nd easting; we later worked out that it was exactly there, crossing that invisible line, that we had been fired on.

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We had, in Fanning's words, poked the bear, and he was now well and truly awake. We were all keen to go back, in force.

The idea was that we would return to Derapet two days later, this time with the Afghans, and with the LAVs and Rob's Personnel Carrier situated in a different location, on top of IED Hill, to give them better visibility over the village. Given the hill's reputation, our engineers would search it first, to make sure the Taliban hadn't planted new bombs or landmines. Our force would also be beefed up with more Australians, infantry and vehicles from FOB Hadrian.

Joel Toms, the commander of the engineer brick, took his guys and their Afghan counterparts to IED Hill the next day. Their search took a lot longer than expected, all day in fact. There was so much metal junk and old shrapnel that their detectors kept on picking up false readings. No-one wanted to take any chances, especially as Dale and Kirby had been killed on a position that had supposedly been swept and cleared. Joel called a halt on the search late in the day because of low light.

On 24 August, the engineers went out again, early in the morning, with the idea that they would finish clearing the hill while the rest of us would be on the move before the day became too hot. We were all ready to go, but there's an old army saying, probably dating back to my Grandad's time, 'Hurry up and wait'. We lazed around Anar Juy, dressed and ready to go in all our kit until around 8.30 am, when we were given the order to leave the Pirate Ship.

Everyone was still ready to go and senses were ratcheted up to the next level of alert when Joel radioed in.

Fanning relayed his message to us. ‘There’s a conga line of women and children leaving the village, no fighting-aged males in their ranks.’

We all knew what that meant. We had been given a warning on the 22nd, when those two Taliban had fired a few shots at us – or maybe their spotters weren’t doing their job that day and we caught the pair by surprise. Whatever the truth of it, with the non-combatants leaving Derapet, there was no doubt that the Taliban were up for a fight today.

It wasn’t just Derapet that was bracing for action. Fanning was getting radio reports from further down the valley, from the other Australian outposts where guys had moved out to rendezvous with us. Afghan civilians were evacuating all the villages strung out along the river valley as their menfolk prepared for war.

‘Boss, this does not feel good,’ I said to Lieutenant Fanning. I wasn’t deterred or scared – this was what we all wanted, but we were under no illusions about the dangerous consequences of ‘poking the bear’.

He nodded as we left the Pirate Ship to marry up with the other forces who would be joining us.

We headed down the hill as we had done two days earlier and propped by the river. Our reinforcements, LAVs and Bushmasters carrying infantry from call sign 4–3, had left from Hadrian at first light, along with a dog team. The vehicles would provide a cut-off force, to stop any Taliban fighters trying to retreat from Derapet, and elements of 4–3 would marry up with us at the river.

There were a couple of gunshots from IED Hill.

Toby, the sig, was on the radio and we all tensed, waiting to see if the battle had kicked off before we even crossed the river. Word came down that Joel’s guys had spotted a couple of Afghans in the open, some distance from them, armed with AK-47s. One of the engineers engaged, firing a couple of shots, but the two men quickly disappeared behind cover.

After the engineers finished and packed up, they came down off IED Hill and joined us. Call sign 4–3 had parked its Bushmasters and some of their guys on a hill on the opposite side of the river to us, the stop position, and a squad, 4–3 Charlie, along with a medic, their platoon sergeant, two snipers and their forward observer, Captain Perkins, and his sig walked down to meet us as we crossed the river.

We had our Afghans with us for this push and our guys, plus the extra Aussies from Hadrian, added up to quite a force. My mate Crash McKinney was in 4–3 and I saw him as we all married up in the green zone.

We shook hands and each dropped to a knee to ease the burden on our backs.

‘Hey, mate, how’s the family?’ I asked Crash.

‘Good, mate,’ he said.

There was no sign of movement, so we sat down on our bums with our backs against a mud wall.

‘When’s Bec due?’ Crash had a daughter, Annabell, and his wife, Beckie, was heavily pregnant with their second child.

‘Not long now, mate,’ he said.

‘You gonna get a chance to get ROCL to be there for the birth?’

‘Yeah, I hope so.’

‘Okay, head out,’ Corporal Chenoworth – Chenno – 4–3’s section commander said to Crash, who, having been recently promoted to lance corporal, was now second-in-command. Crash passed the word to the rest of his guys and he and I said goodbye.

Our scout, Paul Langer, took the lead again, with Sean Lanigan behind him. Lanigan – Lanno – had been a platoon sergeant, but as a mentor he was more of a free agent. As a platoon sergeant, there was no way he would have got away with being up front with the forward scout.

We moved through the green zone, the tips of the barrels of our rifles moving in arcs as we scanned the fields and orchards around us. Unlike two days before, when I’d seen the old Afghan farmer tending to his crops with a hoe, there was no-one to be seen.

It was nine in the morning. I felt the first bead of sweat roll down my cheek.

‘Fuck, it’s going to be a hot one today,’ someone behind me muttered.

My sense of unease grew as we entered the village. At this time of day, it should have been a hive of activity, with kids playing and hassling us for pens and crayons, men conversing in the shade of the compounds, women darting inside. Instead, it was eerily quiet.

We cut through the village, then turned and skirted the main settlement. We were about 100 metres from the green zone, with just a rough line of houses between us and the desert beyond. Derapet, now on our left, was a ghost town.

We were walking in nearly single file and I couldn’t help but feel that this was not just a show-of-force patrol anymore – it felt more like we were advancing to contact. The non-combatants were gone, so the enemy was clearly readying for a fight. I spoke into my PRR, my personal role radio, pressing the black rubber boot that protected the switch from dust and water.

‘Hey, boss, we need to sort out our formation.’

Fanning, to his credit, took that on board, and I shook out to the flank, which meant that if we did walk into the shit, there would be more weapons facing forward, and better all-round defence.

As well as Lanno and Langer, there were a couple of Afghan soldiers up near the front, one carrying an RPG-7, and then me and Parks, with his MAG58 machine gun.

We passed through the spot where the two Taliban had fired on us two days prior. I glanced around me. Every man had his weapon up and senses on full alert. We started to round one of the last of the buildings in the village and the two Afghans pushed up onto some higher ground on the right, as Lanno and Langer followed their line of march into an aqueduct. I followed our guys, not wanting to expose my position like the Afghans had just done.

The silence was ripped apart by the familiar sound of a Russian PKM machine gun open firing. Bullets kicked up water and mud along the aqueduct in front of me. The rest of the burst smacked into the mudbrick wall of the building to my left. More enemy joined the fight, opening up on us from multiple locations. Lanno and Langer immediately began returning fire.

The Afghan soldier directly in front of me hefted his RPG launcher on to his shoulder, readying himself to fire.

What the fuck! I thought. If the PKM didn't get me first, I was about to be vapourised by the back blast of a rocket-propelled grenade.

'Hey!' The RPG man looked back at me, but when I tried to tell him to lower his launcher he didn't understand. I frantically waved at him and he got the message.

As well as the risk to me from the back blast, he could have killed or injured our own guys up front as we couldn't see exactly where they were. There was a risk in firing a rocket-propelled grenade into the thick undergrowth and trees surrounding the aqueduct – if the round hit a branch or something solid, it could detonate early, fragging our people. It crossed my mind that the RPG man was just keen to fire the rocket so it was one less thing for him to carry.

I had to make a quick appraisal about what I would do next, bearing in mind the enemy, my own exposure to fire and my job, which was to make sure the Afghan soldiers did their job to the best of their ability and did not kill us by mistake in the process.

The aqueduct, about fifteen metres in front of me, was a long trench with about a metre-and-a-half's width of flowing water running down the middle and steep sides. In there, we would be covered and concealed from enemy fire. Cover means he can't hit you with a bullet, concealment means he can't see you, but those things work both ways. If I was inside the aqueduct, taking cover, my own visibility would be limited.

Further out to my left was a corn crop, maybe 200 metres wide. In there, we might be concealed, but there was nothing there to stop a round from a PKM.

Up ahead, Lanno and Langer were firing back at the machine gunner, each emptying a magazine or two. They forced the Taliban gunner to retreat, for the moment, and Lanno popped a smoke grenade to mark the forward line of our own troops, for the benefit of our fire support.

The Afghans I had been with were continuing on the path they had taken, up the hill to our right. I knew that I needed to be on that higher ground, even if it was more exposed, in order to see the enemy, and to direct our fire down at them.

I ran and, stupidly, continued on past the Afghans, to the right of them, moving from what had been the reverse side of the slope into plain view of Taliban fighters throughout the valley.

I could almost feel the sheer physical weight of the rounds that came at me at that moment. Dust, dirt and rocks were punched up all around me as machine guns and AK-47s opened up on me. I was the clear target they had all been waiting for since the moment the fight kicked off.

I dropped to my belly and used my big nose to great effect, like a shovel. I remember instructors barking at me during infantry training, ‘Get lower, get lower’, but it wasn’t until right then that I realised how flat I could make my body – I couldn’t get any lower if I tried, melding my body into the ground. I inched my way backwards using elbows and toes and got on the radio to Fanning.

‘This is serious, boss. I’ve been engaged from several locations from across the river to further on down the valley, unknown enemy strength.’

A couple of minutes later, bullets started hitting around me. I could see the rounds striking and from their direction and impact it looked like they were raining down from the sky. It took me a moment to realise that I was now taking fire from a new, elevated position, off to my right. It was a hill we had nicknamed the Sphinx, because of its distinctive shape. I could see the strike of rounds.

Everything was happening at once and Fanning, as he told me later, was about to call up our armoured support, when Toby, the sig, languidly said to him: ‘Boss, maybe you’d better get the LAVs to roll up.’

I could hear over the radio that Victor One-One, Captain Tim Hurley and his LAVs, were indeed moving into position, looking for targets as soon as Lanno had thrown his smoke grenade.

My call sign, the mentoring force, were all split up, so I had to give myself a different name to let the armoured vehicles know where I was, as opposed to the others. Correct radio procedure went out the window.

'Victor One-One, this is Dan on the hill,' I said, forcing myself to stay calm, but speaking very quickly. I gave a very rough approximation of a target indication. 'Sphinx feature. Look for enemy movement somewhere up the top. Engage opportune targets.'

I had nowhere to go. If I went forward, to the top of the hill, every Taliban in the valley would have a crack at me, and if I stayed where I was, the shooters on the Sphinx might get lucky and lob a bullet down on me.

However, I knew that if I gave up that high-ground position, we would have zero eyeballs on the enemy throughout the valley. The Taliban could then be in a position to sneak up and fire on all of the Australians and Afghans.

I didn't have my map out, but I knew I had to work out exactly where the fire was coming from. At a guess, there were at least five locations from which I'd been taking fire.

The LAVs were clearly doing some damage and I thought that I should make sure I didn't become part of it. I took out a smoke grenade. 'Marking own position with smoke,' I said into the radio. I pulled the pin from the grenade and tossed it in front of where I was.

That was the stupidest thing I did that day. By that stage, the guys in the LAVs already knew where I was, and once that smoke started to billow any Taliban fighter who didn't know there was someone on the top of that hill did then. It drew bullets to me like flies to shit.

The Afghans were in less exposed positions to me, further down our hill, on their knees, looking around, but they weren't taking fire. We were now in a fight for information.

Below me, the rest of our force was running forward, but they were bunching up. Lance Corporal Woolley was making sure the Afghans who had been behind me followed their drills and did not bunch up. Within about ten minutes, he sent five or six of them up the slope to support me.

I moved among the Afghans, making sure they kept their spacing. At this point I was relatively covered, but a stray falling bullet from the Sphinx could have killed me at any time.

'We're going to have a crack at them,' Fanning said over the radio. 'Dan, you stay on the high ground. You provide support by fire location and keep their heads down while we move.'

That meant it was my job to find out where the Taliban were firing from and to, then direct Victor One-One's fire on to them. Fanning said that he, Langer and Lanno, in the low ground in the aqueduct, would assault forward. Their fight was more up close and personal than mine – they were getting glimpses of Taliban ahead of them, whereas at this point I couldn't see the people who were shooting at me or their muzzle flashes. I needed to do something about that.

'Four-Three Charlie,' Fanning said on the radio, calling up Chenno's section, including Jared, 'move up, through the aqueduct. Provide support to Dan on the high ground.'

Crash and the boys were a long way behind us, maybe 500 or 600 metres, watching our rear and hanging back in reserve. They now had a long run ahead of them, high knees through the water of the aqueduct, burdened with gear and weapons, to reach me. The temperature and the adrenaline were soaring, in line with the tempo of the battle.

Fanning, Lanigan and Langer were engaging Taliban down in the green zone and along the aqueduct, occasionally catching sight of targets moving through the crops.

'Marking forward line of own troops,' Fanning said into the radio, to Tim Hurley and his LAVs, with the ever-present soundtrack of gunfire close by in the background. He popped a red smoke grenade ahead of his position. 'You're free to engage any targets north of my smoke.'

The LAVs replied in force, fat 25-millimetre rounds shredding vegetation and anyone who got in the way. The crescendo of fire was clear over the noise of the incoming rounds and there was a lot of it.

I was still yet to fire my weapon in that first half hour. When I edged up to the brow of the hill, I could see movement, out to 500 metres – Taliban fighters darting from position to position or between cover. They were moving tactically, two or three at a time, in short bounds. While I had been shot at before, I had never encountered this volume of fire and from so many different directions. The enemy was strung out in an arc nearly 180 degrees in front of me, in positions 50 to 100 metres apart across an 800-metre front.

We knew it was a big force because of the distances between firing points: 50 metres here, 100 there, spread over a wide front.

There were fighters in the aqueduct hammering away at our guys down there and PKM light machine guns on a hill half a kilometre or more away, lobbing bullets at us in a high arc, aiming to produce what gunners call a beaten zone. Rather than trying to hit the Afghans and me with aimed shots, they were trying to throw enough lead down on the hill to hopefully kill or wound us.

The only advantage we had at that point, and it was a very slim one, was the fact that I could more or less see what was going on from my position. If we lost the hill I was on, or I relinquished it to protect myself, then the enemy could really hurt us. They could flank us or seize the hill and bring down even more fire on us.

The Afghans with me had begun returning fire as best as they could, although there was a limit to what they could do without going to the top of the hill; I couldn't blame them for not pushing forward – it was bloody dangerous up there.

I had identified a building where people were coming and going. I reckoned it was either a command post or perhaps a supply dump. We needed to get some fire on it. I grabbed the Afghan with the RPG who had very nearly fried me with the back blast of his first projectile.

'I need you to punch a couple of rockets into that building mate,' I said to him.

He looked at me blankly.

Our interpreter, who had been a university student before joining us, was down in the aqueduct so I had to pantomime what I wanted as the RPG man and I crawled to a position where he could see the valley. Both of us instinctively ducked and winced as bullets flew over and around us. I pointed to the building and tapped his launcher.

He still didn't seem to be getting it so, as patiently as I could, I picked up a couple of stones off the ground and set them out, using one to indicate us – I pointed to him, me and the rock – and the other, further away, as the building.

'*Whoosh,*' I said to him as I mimicked pulling a trigger and sending a rocket from our stone to the building's marker.

He grinned, rolled over and loaded a grenade. He took aim, I made sure I was out of the way and not behind him, and he fired. The projectile streaked away from us, and landed in the green zone, but nowhere near the building. I pointed to the building again and he nodded and reloaded.

His second shot also missed, but it was much closer, probably near enough to frighten the people inside.

The Afghan soldier looked at me, grinned and gave me a thumbs up. 'RPG good!'

I nodded. 'Yes, mate, RPG good.'

I had a CamelBak water carrier and I put the rubber nozzle in my mouth and sucked on it. It was gurgling air, nearly empty. I'd drunk almost three litres of water in first half hour of the contact, running up the hill and from position to position. I went to Parks, who was stoically ignoring the rounds landing around him, and coolly and methodically returning fire with his MAG58 whenever he spotted a target.

'You got any water, mate?' I asked him.

He reached down and tapped the side pocket of his camouflage trousers, bulging with a spare water bottle.

'Mate, I'll need one of those soon.'

Parks nodded.

I said to Parks: 'This is not going great, mate, we need something to break this up. We need some fire support.'

I ran down the hill to where Chenno and Crash and the lead elements of their team were just blocking up to our position. They were gasping and panting from their run. I went to Perko, Captain Perkins, their joint fires officer.

‘Mate,’ I said to him, with no time for the niceties of rank, ‘I need you to come up on the hill so we can drop some bombs on these fuckers.’

Perko followed me up as the rest of 4–3 Charlie splashed through the aqueduct.

‘We need to identify targets,’ I said to Perko, as we crouched and crawled near the brow of the hill. I pointed out the building the RPG man and I had been trying to target, and other features of the battlefield below. ‘I believe they’re using the aqueduct to conceal their movements. Mate, we need to get some fucking fire on all these targets.’

It wasn’t easy for him to see, so I got up on one knee to better point out a feature. As soon as my profile broke the silhouette of the hill, someone down in the valley opened up. I heard the distinctive *crack-thump* of a bullet passing close over my head.

Parks, behind his gun, looked over at me and shook his head. ‘Change your fucking position if you’re going to keep putting your head up like that.’

Parks wasn’t being insubordinate, just talking common sense. The Taliban were watching me and waiting for me to pop my head up again.

Some of 4–3 Charlie were making it up on to the hill and I heard someone yell out in pain.

Next thing, someone was on the radio. ‘We’ve taken a casualty on the high ground.’

I was still getting shot at and trying to find targets and give indications to Perko, the forward observer. I registered that we had taken a casualty and, as with getting shot at, that presented a problem we had to solve. That’s all I thought of, to begin with, what needed to be done. We would need to organise a casevac helicopter, and that would require us locating and securing a landing zone.

I ducked back down into cover and looked around me. It was then that I realised it was my mate Crash who had been hit, apparently shot in the arm.

He was lying on the ground behind a machine gun, and there were a few other guys, including a medic, clustering around him.

Okay, I thought, *Crash was hit, but everything seems to be under control*. With luck, the wound was a simple through-and-through and they could put a bandage around his arm and maybe even keep him in the fight. Knowing the quality of our people and their training, I knew he would be in good hands. *What's next, what do we have to do?* I asked myself.

Then things went downhill.

SEVENTEEN

When I glanced back again at Crash, someone was crouched over him, giving him CPR, pushing down on his chest the way we'd been taught to do during first-aid training.

What the fuck? I thought. *He's been shot in the arm – why are they doing that?*

The tactical situation was also worsening. It seemed that fire was coming from a new direction – if that was possible – off to our left. The Taliban were outflanking us and that had exposed Crash and the team trying to help him to more enemy fire. Bullets were striking around them.

Crash had been hit in the left arm, the bullet hitting him from an enfilade position, off to one side.

Clearly, Crash was going to need that casevac. The enemy was trying to get around us. Enfilade fire was the ideal precursor to an attack on a position – if you can position a machine gun off to the flank of your target you can keep on firing at it, from an oblique angle, to cover your forces advancing from the front without hitting your own people. The Taliban had their sights set on wiping us out.

We had a small window of opportunity to start dropping bombs and gain control of this situation. I knew that as soon as a chopper was close to us, it would need clear air – any artillery and air support would have to cease so as not to accidentally blow the casevac helicopter out of the sky.

One of the LAV crew had dismounted and brought out an 84, a Carl Gustaf shoulder-fired anti-armour weapon. He fired an airburst round that rained shrapnel over the green zone in the valley off to our left to try to disrupt the firing coming from over there. That was good, but we needed more.

There were 155-millimetre American heavy artillery howitzers at FOB Hadrian, and I knew from our briefing there were also 120-millimetre mortars that were just within range of us. Perko had the power to also call up Apache helicopters or fast movers as well.

'I'm going to give you the opportunity to have a look,' I said to Perko. He nodded.

I knew 100 per cent that if I gave the enemy a clear target to fire at, they would make the most of it. Perko would then be able to get a better look at the enemy positions, register where they were and call in some fire on them.

Parks was still plugging away with his machine gun and I called to him, to let him know my plan. 'I'm going to try and draw the fire away.'

The look on his face was priceless. It was like: *You're going to do what*?

I nodded.

I got up, took three steps forward, so I was well and truly on the top of the hill, and started running.

I could see bullets striking the ground around me, burying themselves in the dirt or sending stones skipping in different directions. I was taking fire from throughout the valley, from PKM light machine guns and AK-47s. Again, I could hear the *crack-thump* of rounds going over my head.

All I could think of was that I hoped Perko could see where these buggers were. I ran along the crest of the hill in a straight line, then turned and ran back down toward our position. At least once I was on the downhill positions, I was 'only' exposed to fire from the Taliban who were trying to outflank us.

Mercifully, I could see that the enemy had stopped firing on the men treating Crash while I was doing my run.

I dropped to the ground near Parks.

'They were getting really close to you,' he said.

'No shit.'

'Be careful!'

I said to Perko: 'Do you know where they are now? Are you happy?'

'I've got an idea,' he said.

It hadn't been enough. Perko still needed to get a fix on the Taliban machine-gun positions and as soon as I had taken cover the bullets had started landing around Crash and the others.

I had been hoping Perko would be able to get a better idea of where the enemy were, but it was the fog of war and the Taliban were well hidden down in the valley.

That first run had been like stepping off a high cliff but instead of falling to my death, a gust of wind had caught me and blown me back up onto the bluff. It was the same as me taking the plunge out of Changi Anning's hayloft in my Superman outfit, that same weird rush, not even thinking of the consequences.

The guys were still working on Crash and I knew I needed to go again. The fact that Crash was my mate had absolutely nothing to do with my decision, and by that I mean it could have been any other soldier lying there wounded and under fire and I still would have done what I did.

I stepped off the cliff again. As I ran up the hill, I could tell the volume of fire from the left was switching, along with every other gun in the valley, now aiming at me on the top of that hill.

Something I was sure of was that if I was hit I had confidence and faith in my team, in my mates, that they would drag me off that hill, and that they would do their best to fix me up and throw me on that casevac chopper.

I was under no illusion that this was risky, but I wasn't so much thinking of my own safety. The flipside of me having faith in my team was the concern that if I was hit, I would become another problem – a burden for the others to deal with – and that I would tie up men and resources as they worked on me and evacuated me, if I lived. At the same time, I knew that something more needed to be done if Perko was to find the targets, if the guys were to get Crash off that hill to a safe landing zone.

The blood rushed in my ears and I breathed hard, burdened with equipment, dehydrated, but charged with adrenaline. The bullets came at me again and, thankfully, shifted from Crash and co.

Still alive and unhurt, I made it back to Parks and Captain Perkins again.

‘Can you identify the targets that I pointed out to you?’ I asked him. ‘If I keep doing this, I’ll get shot in the face next time and then we’ll be up shit creek without a paddle.’

‘I think I can identify a few,’ Perko said.

I could understand his hesitation about not wanting to drop bombs randomly into a village when he couldn’t precisely identify enemy targets. At the end of the day, people – civilians – who had nothing to do with the fight lived down there. I could also understand Perko not wanting to get shot in the face, but we needed fire support to break up the enemy attack – I knew that there was nothing like a few 500-pound bombs to devastate the enemy’s will to fight.

‘Don’t stand up in the same position again,’ Parks called to me, repeating his advice and reading my mind. Although he was a young soldier he was reminding me of basic lessons I had learned at Singleton, but had either forgotten or ignored in the heat of battle. I knew that if I got up where I’d lain down, this time I really would get a bullet in the face. Parks made me consider the bigger picture again, and the risk of what I’d been doing.

I crawled a bit, then stood and ran for a third time. This time I knew I was really pushing my luck and I fully expected to be shot. In my mind, I think I was actually weighing the odds, hoping that if I was hit, the bullet would strike the chest plates in my vest or glance off my Kevlar helmet. I hoped that if, or when, I was shot, it was in the arm.

With bullets chasing me all the way, I somehow made it back to Perko and Parks, and slid down gratefully to the ground again.

Perkins had by now been able to identify some targets, but we now had a new problem. He told me his radio had dropped its fill. This meant he had lost his encrypted link back to base, a technical malfunction. Shit like that happens in battle. When you’re moving from cover to cover and being shot at you throw yourself at the ground; you’re not thinking of a soft landing or taking care of the gear attached to your body armour. It was possible his radio had taken a knock and dislodged the battery.

I threw my MBITR radio to Perko. It wasn’t configured to call up air support, but he had the relevant frequencies so I hoped he could make it work. I still had my PRR, my personal role radio, allowing me to communicate with my immediate team, but by giving him the MBITR, I'd lost the ability to call anyone outside of my call sign.

Our team's next challenge was to get Crash out of Derapet. I knew I needed to help prepare a landing zone so, for a fourth time, I pushed my luck and stood and ran. This time I was heading off the hill, but the Taliban opened up on me again. This had the by-product of taking some of the heat off the guys who were treating Crash and starting to move him.

Crash's platoon sergeant, Nathan Tolman, knocked up a nine-liner casualty evacuation message, advising Tarin Kowt of the pick-up location, enemy threat, the details of Crash's injury and his status. The message was relayed back to Anar Juy, through Lukas Woolley, to our intelligence corporal, who was manning the command post, and he then relayed the message to FOB Hadrian and they passed it on to TK.

By that point, the guys were half-carrying, half-dragging Crash off the hill. Fanning ordered our engineers to find and clear a landing zone for the casevac helicopter.

Private Tommy Miranda, from Corporal Marsh's section, linked up with me and together, Tommy and I cleared a series of empty buildings in the vicinity of the landing zone, to make sure there were no Taliban waiting there to ambush the chopper. Fanning had decided to bring the casevac into the built-up part of the village, rather than out in the *dascht* where it would have been an easier target.

All this time, the LAVs were engaging targets wherever they could see them, pumping 25-millimetre rounds into the aqueducts, buildings and the green zone.

I left Tommy to provide perimeter security and I pushed over to where Crash was and squatted down beside him and the other members of 4–3 Charlie who had carried him to the landing zone. They had been performing CPR on Crash the whole time, but his skin was ghost pale.

As the US Army Black Hawk helicopter made its approach, Fanning got on the radio. 'Rapid fire into all known enemy locations, make sure they don't have the opportunity to engage.'

It was a tight fit for the Black Hawk to land and it took the pilot two attempts. The tips of his rotor blades were probably no more than a metre from mud walls as he set her down. The sky was browned-out and the helicopter obscured from view by a wall of dust, barley and chaff that was blown out by the downwash.

One of the crew onboard that helicopter later told Corporal Marsh that he had never seen anything like that evacuation. They could see our guys laying down rifle and machine-gun fire and, not far away, ten to fifteen Taliban fighters taking cover behind a building as a storm of 25-millimetre rounds from a LAV smashed into the wall that was sheltering them, forcing them to keep their heads down. The crew reckoned they had never seen the amount of enemy movement they witnessed that day, and they'd been flying for a long time. We knew from the weight of fire we were taking that there were blokes everywhere shooting at us, but the aircrew, from their elevated position had visual perspective of just how dangerous the situation was that they were rolling into. That crew earned their pay that day.

The guys carried Crash to the chopper and loaded him on board, with Woolley giving Jared a pat on the bum.

'I love you mate,' Woolley said to him. The chopper lifted off.

Parks was still up on the hill, manning his post with the Afghan soldiers.

I started feeling the effects of dehydration, my CamelBak long finished. I hit Parks up for that water bottle I had asked him for at the start of the contact, and smashed it, along with a small packet of peanuts. I remember, distinctly, crumpling the empty packet and stuffing it in my pocket. In training we had been taught to leave no rubbish behind that might betray our presence and here, in the mid of all this chaos and blood, this simple thing had stuck in my mind, the need not to litter.

Still without air or artillery support, Parks and I and the others settled into a small war of attrition, trading shots with the Taliban in the valley. The LAVs had run out of ammunition and drove back to Anar Juy to reload.

Fanning was on the radio to Tarin Kowt throughout the battle, caught between trying to run a disjointed series of actions on the ground and keeping pace with his superiors' constant request for updates.

Our own ammunition was running low and I checked on the other Aussies around me, to see how their stocks were going. I hadn't fired as many rounds as some of the others, so I handed out a few of my magazines to those who needed them.

Fanning was talking to TK about our supplies, and preparations were put in place to organise another helicopter to come out and drop off more ammunition for us, in the field. This was shaping up to be a repeat of Delta Company's most famous engagement, at Long Tan in Vietnam in 1966, where boxes of bullets had been tossed out of low-flying choppers in the middle of a pitched battle and a tropical storm.

I moved between the Afghans, checking on them as best as I could, then settled in beside Parks, covering him when he had to reload or clear stoppages on his MAG58, and trading shots with the Taliban.

The volume of fire decreased. It was still as dangerous as all get out, probably still more so than any other contact I had been in, but compared to the first half of the fight, which was full-on, this had settled into harassment fire being answered in kind.

With Perko's radio still out of action, our forward observer, the artillery bombardier stuck back at Anar Juy, had managed to call up some Apache attack helicopters. They did some strafing runs along the aqueducts.

By now, we were into the third hour of the conflict. We could have stayed there all day, but there seemed little point as both sides had lost their momentum and ours was getting perilously low on ammunition. Instead of calling for the resupply in the field, Fanning gave the order for us to pull out and move back to Anar Juy.

As we came down off the hill and made our way back around the village, we heard the sound of vehicle engines.

'Hey guys, we've got friendlies coming in behind us, don't shoot them,' Fanning said over the radio.

Churning up the riverbed was a convoy of American Stryker vehicles, their version of the LAV. This was the valley's QRF, a quick reaction force, from FOB Hadrian. They had heard about what was going on and had set out to help us. The Americans at that time did not have their own engineer support, so without the ability to stop at choke points and check for IEDs and landmines, it would have been too dangerous for them to travel by road. Instead, they had off-roaded all the way along the riverbed.

‘Y’all need any help?’ the American commander called down to Fanning from his Stryker.

‘Hey, can I ask you to wait in place?’ Fanning said, as exhausted as the rest of us. ‘And cover our move up to the base. We’re all pretty fucked and we’re out of ammo and water.’

What really pleased and encouraged me was that along with the Americans were thirty Afghan National Army guys in HiLux utes. Our Afghan commander and his interpreter had, independently, called up their own QRF and they had rallied and arrived ready to take the fight to the enemy.

For us, however, it was an anticlimax.

As we trudged to the river, there was a scream through the air as a single long-range 155-millimetre Excalibur artillery round arrived unannounced from Hadrian and demolished the building the RPG man and I had been aiming at earlier.

‘What the fuck are they shooting at?’ someone asked.

‘Americans just love dropping bombs,’ I said. *Better late than never*, I thought.

It was midday, summer in Afghanistan, the sun assaulting our bodies like a relentless enemy, and each of us was coming to terms with what had just happened. Crash had been evacuated but we carried part of him with us – literally, his forty-odd kilograms of gear distributed among us, arms burning. I hadn’t even had time to process what had happened to my friend.

Our force of Australians split into two again. Four-Three Charlie, with Chenno and Captain Perkins but minus Crash, left us at the river and walked back to the hill where their Bushmasters were still waiting for them. No words were exchanged. This had been such a huge effort on the part of everyone in the team and many of them had performed outstanding feats. Now, however, we were going our separate ways, with no chance to talk through, together, what we had all been through, or make sense of it.

The rest of us, Marsh and his section, the Afghans and us mentors, trudged wearily back to Anar Juy. As tough as my infantry training had been, and as tired as I had been during my first tour of Afghanistan, this walk was the hardest thing I'd done in my life.

As we splashed slowly through the river, I could see the Pirate Ship on the hill. Half-dazed, I lifted a hand, pointing to it, as if reminding myself that was where I needed to go.

I had run, several times, up and around the crest of the hill during the fight, adrenaline and sheer necessity powering my legs, but now I was spent.

Shit, I thought, as the sun near blinded me, *I need to walk up another fucking hill*.

*

It's funny how you can compartmentalise.

The weight of my gear dug into my shoulders, every gram a burden as I put one foot in front of the other, walking up that hill. My shins were on fire with every step, my head pounding with a headache brought on by dehydration. My body was shutting down, but I, like everyone else, knew we had to carry on.

I am not going to stop, I said to myself. *People are relying on me; I am not going to let Crash down. I still have a job to do. One more step*.

I knew I needed to get back to Anar Juy. I needed fresh radio batteries; I needed to re-bomb – load up again with grenades and ammunition; and I knew there was the strong possibility that we may get attacked. We had obviously inflicted casualties on the enemy, but they had decided to stand and fight and they might decide to attack us.

Once we made it inside our little fort, there was an incongruous mix of scenes. Young men slumped in the dirt, sweat-soaked shirts undone, gear lying in untidy piles where it had been shrugged off, but hands shaking with exhaustion-loaded plastic magazines with 5.56-millimetre rounds, readying for the next fight.

Everyone had been in the fight. I had left Anar Juy that morning with ten magazines of ammunition, 300 rounds, and I had two left, although I had handed out a few to other soldiers. Fanning, our commander in the centre of the patrol formation, had just eleven bullets left from the 210 he had carried into battle.

My vision was narrowing, a tunnel encroaching at the edges, as I gulped hot water from a plastic bottle, desperate to pump some fluid back into my system. I remember little of that time in the aftermath of Derapet.

Fanning says he saw me throwing up. I can’t even remember that, but I’m not surprised.

‘I know everyone wants to know about Crash,’ Fanning announced to all of us, ‘but I don’t have any news yet.’

Those of us who had seen him or worked on him prior to him being loaded onto the chopper said nothing, but we were all pretty sure.

The LAVs rolled back in. There was the range of emotions of men who have survived death. Some were on a high, reliving what had happened loudly, others withdrawn and reflective.

No matter how hard you think you do it while training, it pales by comparison when your life’s on the line and your mates’ lives are in the balance.

We posted sentries and reports came back of movement in the village of Derapet. They tended to their wounded and they buried their dead. The women and the children and the old men drifted back and in a very short time life returned to normal. Shepherds and their sheep were once again visible and the old farmer I had seen two days earlier, and those like him, went back to tending their crops. War for these people was seasonal, part of the rhythm of life, and when the shooting was done, life resumed, as it always had done.

‘The kids are picking up the fucking brass,’ someone observed through a pair of binoculars. We knew what that meant. The spent casings of the rounds we had fired would be recycled and packed into IEDs with a chunk of explosive and a detonator to make shrapnel to kill or injure soldiers like us.

A dust storm rolled in that afternoon, ominously blotting out the sun.

Fanning was in the command post, talking on the radio to Major Chris Wallace, the Delta Company commander. I heard later that Major Wallace was in tears.

Fanning came out of the command post. 'I need everyone to go upstairs.'

We all knew what that meant. There was only once piece of news that required us all to be in one place.

Rituals come easy to people in uniform – some are forced, some evolve. We live our lives by rule and custom. In just three months in 2010, 6 RAR had become accustomed to the news of loss and how it was delivered.

Fanning waited then looked around, making sure we were all present. 'These are the hardest words I've ever had to say. Crash was pronounced dead on arrival by the resus team. There was nothing they could do.'

There was silence as we all processed the news, even those of us who knew or had guessed. Crash had been shot in the arm, as was first reported, but the round had come from the left and passed through his arm and into his chest.

'Today was full on,' Fanning continued, 'you should all be incredibly proud of yourselves. If you feel like I do, then our next thing to do is grieve, and one of the ways we can do that is by taking the fight to the enemy.'

He was right. I don't know for sure, because we are all different, but if I was to lay money on it, I would say that there would not have been a man there at Anar Juy who was not ready to go back out there, outside the wire, and do that.

It was not about revenge. We had come to this little valley in the middle of nowhere to do a job and we'd had a good crack at it. Not everything had gone to plan, but we had gone where others had not gone before and if Crash's death was not to be in vain, then we needed to carry on, to complete that job.

'Can someone go and get the 84 and a flare?' James said.

The other part of the ritual was to send up a flare for every man we lost, while we were all gathered there together. We had done it for the others, using a handheld signal flare, but Crash had been close to many of us and had fallen alongside us, so Fanning wanted the biggest flare we had.

The dust storm was still blowing in and whatever light was up there somewhere had been lost in a dark red haze that was verging on pitch black.

A couple of the guys loaded the Carl Gustaf and the rest of us turned our eyes to the heavens as the 84-millimetre flare streaked high up into the sky, with a bang and a flash that burned bright enough to bring light to the gloom, then slowly disappeared.

EIGHTEEN

Back in Australia, Kathryn was woken in the early hours of a morning by a text message saying a member of our task force had been killed in action and that the next of kin were being notified.

In Afghanistan, the internet had been switched off at those bases which enjoyed that level of luxury and all calls home were banned until the news had been passed to Crash's wife, now widow, Beckie. I thought of her, pregnant with their second child, and how Jared and I had briefly discussed the possibility of him going home for the birth. That was the last conversation I would ever have with my friend.

The communications ban didn't stop the wives and girlfriends from talking, and even before the news went public Kathryn had learned from her network that Jared had been killed and that I had done something stupid, running up a hill.

Kathryn was sick and had arranged to stay at home from work that day. She had been busy trying to get someone from the army to help Jess, the partner of Thomas Dale, who, along with Grant Kirby, had been killed just four days earlier. Jess had not been registered with the military as Thomas's partner, but she eventually received support to get to his funeral in Adelaide. On top of all that there were plans underway for a memorial service at Enoggera which now, sadly, would be for three lost friends.

'Are you okay?' I asked Kathryn when I was finally able to make a call home, using the crappy satellite phone.

'What do you mean "Are *you* okay"?' she replied. 'How are *you*?'

'I'm alright,' I said.

'When are you coming home? I've had enough of this.'

There were still a couple more months left in our tour and we were determined to take the fight to the enemy again and to ensure Crash had not died in vain.

*

Immediately after the battle, Sean Lanigan and I and the other NCOs got together with Fanning to do a debrief and to plan our next move.

We'd had a plan when we went into Derapet, and we knew we were going to provoke a reaction, but in the wake of the long engagement, we had learned a lot and we discussed how we might do things differently and better.

For a start, we knew we had to have our fire support sorted before we went back out there, and there was no question of us not going back. We had a good idea now of how and where the enemy would move when he brought his forces to contact. We needed to have key targets marked and designated so we could refer to them when we called up fire support – for example, the aqueduct where Fanning, Lanigan and Langer had been fighting would now be known as Gun Run Purple. Our forward observer would have the coordinates of a list of likely targets.

The next morning, Fanning presented his plan to company headquarters. When he had finished in the command post, he came and found the rest of us.

'They've said no,' he said.

I shook my head. 'That's bullshit.'

The word, it appeared, had come down from higher up that we would not be going back into Derapet. It seemed the government back home had lost its appetite for prosecuting the war and for more casualties.

We were bombed up and ready to go out again and, again, as far as I could tell, there was no-one at Anar Juy who did not want to do just that. Crash was one of us. We felt his loss more keenly than any politician or senior officer, and as much as we all missed him, we felt the best way to honour him was to do the job we had been sent to do – the job the Afghans also wanted to do. Fanning had told us that the Afghan commander had been full of praise for us and they wanted to go back as well.

I was angry. Fanning was angry. Everyone was pissed off and to make matters worse a dog-and-pony show of people flew in from Tarin Kowt to visit us and learn all about the battle.

These people had better be careful, I thought, as the visitors streamed in. I held my tongue. For some of them, it might have been their only chance to get outside the wire to a patrol base and while on one hand it was good that they wanted to show their support for us, on the other hand, I was starting to question the whole war and what we were doing there at all if we were going to be prevented from doing our job.

It was small consolation, but we learned in the coming days that we had inflicted some damage on the Taliban. Our intelligence people, using an array of sources, worked out from communications and observation of graves and other indicators that we had killed between thirty-five and fifty members of a force we estimated to be around 150 men.

Our anger did not dissipate; the Taliban may have been licking their wounds, but we could have been putting them out of their misery.

*

Courage is a funny thing and it takes many forms.

Many people would say that what I did on the hill that day was reckless and stupid. Lanigan and Langer showed what others believe exemplifies true bravery, pushing forward through the aqueduct and taking out an enemy machine gun.

Fanning stayed cool under fire, being shot at and being stuck in the middle of a confusing situation, under pressure from people above him and having to deal with the loss of one of his men. Parks was on that hill the whole time, bullets landing around him as he returned fire with his machine gun, and Crash had busted a gut to run nearly 600 metres through water to get into the fight. The guys who treated him did everything they could to save his life, exposing themselves to enemy bullets as they did so.

The Afghan commander could have been content to stay locked in Anar Juy, venturing out to do the occasional vehicle checkpoint at very little risk to himself and his men, but it was he who had wanted to go into Derapet, to cross the line, and to take the fight to the enemies of his country.

Beckie MacKinney was courageous. Not even able to bury her husband Jared – Crash – in quiet dignity, she had to share her sorrow with politicians and other strangers. She went into labour with her second child during the funeral service. Her son, Noah, will grow up never knowing his father, but he can be proud of the courage Crash showed, charging forward to join the battle.

Kathryn and the other wives, girlfriends, mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers and children went to bed every night not knowing if they would get the text message telling them someone else's loved one had been killed, or the knock at the door from the families officer and the padre telling them that it was their life that would be forever changed.

Courage.

*

Our patrolling did not stop, but we did not cross the 42nd easting again. Day to day life at Anar Juy – dealing with broken generators, unreliable resupply and our Afghans – meant there wasn't time to dwell on the battle. Different groups of people had done amazing things, but it took a long time before any of us were able to understand the whole picture.

Our keen young Afghan officer rotated out and was replaced with a political appointee, some guy who was well connected. He was useless.

We went out on patrol with the new guy, to the south west of Derapet. The area was pretty benign, but we couldn't ever afford to drop our guard.

The Afghan commander wanted to stop and when we did, we noticed that the civilians in the area were starting to drift away. That was a sign that they knew something we didn't.

The commander, meanwhile, ordered his soldiers to start collecting firewood to take back to Anar Juy and, while they were at it, to help themselves to some pomegranates from a farmer's orchard.

Mentoring is not just training or barking orders. There's a degree of diplomacy involved. 'I suggest we keep moving,' Fanning said to his counterpart.

'Yes, yes, we are coming, we are coming,' the Afghan officer said, then spoke to his men in their language. They showed no sign of leaving the orchard and continued harvesting pomegranates.

Tactically, we were not in a good position if something did go down. Fanning addressed the commander again. 'If you want to pick fruit or get firewood, we can do that later.'

'It is fine,' the Afghan officer said.

Fanning was doing his best to keep his cool, but I could see his patience was wearing thin. 'No, it's not fine. We need to go.'

The Afghan squared up to him. 'I am ordering my men to do this, and you need to protect us.'

Fanning turned to us. 'Okay, let's move out.'

We saddled up and started to move off. One by one, the Afghan soldiers, who by and large were good guys who we had established a good rapport with, stopped picking fruit or gathering sticks and took up their rifles and began following us. They didn't want to be left out there without us.

Back at Anar Juy, Fanning made his report. Well connected the officer might have been, but soon he was gone.

*

His replacement was the polar opposite. He was an old major, a real hardcore guy who had served with the mujahedin. He was great.

We were running a range practice, the Afghans in the prone position, plugging away at targets we had set up. The mentors were walking along the line, correcting the soldiers' techniques, praising those who were doing well.

One of the Afghans was changing magazines, and as he cocked his weapon, he accidentally pulled the trigger. It was clearly a negligent discharge.

The old major walked calmly along the firing line, his hands behind his back until he was standing behind the guilty man. Without a word, he raised his right leg, bending at the knee and delivered a thumping donkey kick to the back of the hapless soldier's head. The crack was like a gunshot.

The major turned to Fanning. 'He says sorry.'

Our bond with the ordinary Afghan soldiers, their diggers and NCOs, was strong and we had worked hard to build it, not just through training, but by socialising with them. We let them use our gym gear and occasionally we would let one or two of them into our recreation area, such as it was, to play *Call of Duty* on a laptop.

Later in the war, the Taliban began infiltrating its operators into the Afghan National Army with the aim of gaining the friendship of coalition soldiers and then setting them off, like time bombs. These undercover plants would then detonate bombs or open fire on their allies with a rifle. We would lose several good men this way, but in 2010 this was still unheard of.

The Afghan major, however, was so by the book that he did not want his men fraternising with us when we weren't on patrol or training. We tried to find ways around that, such as putting on a barbecue to celebrate Eid al-Fitr, when the Muslims break their fast at the end of Ramadan.

We organised for the Afghan soldiers to buy us a sheep from the village and, using the skills I'd learned from Cowboy, I helped the Afghans skin it. Changi Anning's old adage proved right again, that a country boy had a greater ability to survive adversity than the city boys.

*

I was in the tower of the Pirate Ship, sitting behind the machine gun, manning the radio. It was a clear September day, the sting just starting to go out of the sun now that summer was waning.

Fanning and some of the guys and the Afghans were out. It was election day and our job was to provide security, but not to have a heavy presence at polling booths and thereby give the impression we were trying to influence the vote.

In the valley was a dry riverbed called the Dirji Manda and in the middle of it was an old school, about 300 metres away from our position. People coming into Derapet from the surrounding villages to vote used the watercourse as a footpath and most of them would naturally pass the schoolhouse, so it was a good place to set up a checkpoint where the Afghan National Army guys could check people's IDs and look for anyone trying to smuggle in weapons.

As I sat there, there was a *whoosh* and a *boom* as an RPG round streaked out of nowhere and detonated near the schoolhouse. Rifle and machine-gun fire erupted.

I picked up the radio handset and keyed it, and spoke to the command post at FOB Hadrian. 'This is Anar Juy, contact, wait out.'

That told our company headquarters that something was happening, and my job from then on was to relay information. Victor One-One, the call sign with the two LAVs, had left us by this time, but we still had Rob with his Personnel Carrier LAV, armed with a .50 calibre. He was in position to cover the schoolhouse and his gunner started looking for targets to engage.

Lance Corporal Woolley was also at Anar Juy and his guys stood to, ready to join the fight. Fanning was down in the valley with the Afghans and he reported back and I relayed the message.

Fanning made the decision to pull back to the fort and the patrol made a run for it as our guys laid down covering fire. The .50 calibre on the PC was firing, as were Woolley's guys and someone was lobbing rounds from the 84 at suspected positions.

None of our people was wounded or killed, but the Taliban had let us know they were still out there and while they might have been bloodied by the battle at Derapet, they were still in the game. No doubt their intent had been to disrupt polling day and for a while they had.

For their part, the Taliban melted away, back into their compounds, as soon as the schoolhouse was evacuated. They had been lucky at Derapet, that we had not been able to marshal the might of the coalition's air and artillery firepower in time to deliver a crushing blow, but they knew what would happen to them if they stood their ground.

Again, there was no question of us mounting a follow-up patrol or a counterattack. It would have been denied. The Afghan election gave our politicians and commanders a face-saving excuse to keep us corralled in our forward operating bases. The order not to put on a heavy show of force on the day of the election had been code for ‘stay indoors’ and ‘stay safe’.

*

Morale suffered, not because we had lost a man, but as a result of the new strategy, or, rather, lack of one.

We kept up the routine of training the Afghans and conducting patrols, but we were no longer allowed to go looking for a fight. We had been reduced to just holding ground, rather than seizing it.

Tensions rose in the pressure-cooker environment. Woolley let fly one day. ‘How come we’re not out there? Our guys are getting killed for nothing. Why are we here if we can’t do our job?’

He spoke for all of us.

The monotony of life in the Pirate Ship was broken just once more, at the end of September. The sun had set on the Tangi Valley and I was lying on my bunk, reading, when gunfire erupted.

I was in shorts and a T-shirt and I shrugged on my body armour, put on my webbing and helmet, grabbed my Steyr and went out. I was ready to go, as were we all, but it is amazing how quickly one can become blasé about combat. Guys were manning the walls, but most of them were in thongs and PT shorts, and one was still dripping wet, as he’d been caught halfway through his shower.

Surprisingly, it seemed like the Taliban had decided to have a pretty good crack at us. A couple of PKM light machine guns were targeting the Pirate Ship and they were obviously very well sighted, as rounds were literally passing between the corrugated-iron roof and the sandbags of the observation tower, forcing the guys up there to keep their heads down.

Glowing tracer rounds arced across the night sky toward us.

‘The fireflies are attacking us,’ Joel Toms, the engineer corporal, said. I started laughing. It was funny, getting a fit of the giggles while bullets were coming in at us.

Fanning was taking things seriously, though. Sustained and well-aimed machine-gun fire could very well be the prelude to an all-out assault on the Pirate Ship – it was exactly the type of tactic we would have used to prep for an attack.

‘Check the Claymores, make sure they’re ready to go,’ he said.

‘Fucking calm down, boss,’ someone replied from the dark. We liked him well enough to be able to joke with him and he could take it.

We opened up with the .50-calibre heavy machine gun, putting a hundred rounds out into the valley where we thought the PKMs were. The .50-cal was our way of saying, ‘If you want to have a crack at us, fellas, you’re going to be in for a surprise.’

The enemy fire died off. In reality, although we were a small force, we were armed to the teeth and could call in a firestorm of support if we needed to. It would have taken a battalion to dislodge us.

*

By October, our tour was ending, and we were all well and truly ready to leave.

Our emotions had run the full gamut at Anar Juy. We had gone from being excited and enthused at the chance to finally put our years of training to the ultimate test and we had been partnered with a young dynamic Afghan officer who was ready to fight for his country.

We had cried for the loss of a friend and been pumped and ready to finish the fight we had started, and from there we had spiralled into boredom and then near despair. We had seen the best and the worst our allies had to offer, and we had lost confidence in the people who had sent us to war in the first place.

In Derapet, on that scorching August day, we had pushed our bodies to the very limits in a pitched battle that lasted more than three hours and we had done things none of us had imagined we would ever do. But that was just a memory now, a war story that might have gone unreported in Australia if someone hadn't leaked the details to the media. Combat had gone from being the ultimate test to a relative inconvenience.

A new mentoring force based around 5 RAR was moving in-country to replace us and we began a phased withdrawal. I was given the nod to go and I packed my gear.

About ten minutes before the helicopter arrived, there was an explosion across the valley on the hill, where 4–3 Charlie's Bushmasters had been parked during the Battle of Derapet to provide fire support.

We had no friendly forces out that day and word soon came back that a civilian vehicle, a minibus full of local people, had driven over a landmine. Several men, women and children had been accidentally killed by a device laid by one of their own, perhaps even one of the victims' neighbour or relative.

Of course, the landmine had been put there to kill us, in case we ever decided to go into Derapet again and once more use that hill to place fire support.

Once we realised there was no danger to us, the Chinook helicopter came into land and I walked through the tornado-like downwash of grit and dust and boarded. As those of us on board strapped in and the chopper took off, I looked out the window.

I have no poignant memories of that moment, other than, *Sweet, I'm getting out of here. Tonight*, I thought, *I would be able to have a hot shower and a shit on some porcelain*.

NINETEEN

I spent a week in Tarin Kowt, at which time an officer said to me, ‘There’s no point in you hanging around. We’ve already started sending guys back to Dubai, so you might as well go.’

I hadn’t had a chance to catch up with the rest of the guys from Anar Juy, as a group, or to even talk about what we’d been through and try to make sense of it all, but I was not about to hang around in Afghanistan any longer than I had to.

The standard army psychological debrief I was given was a tick and flick affair, a quick chat with a stranger. I had been through some crazy stuff, but there was no-one to share it with. It was frustrating. The army seemed to think it was doing me a favour by getting me out of there as quickly as possible.

From Afghanistan, I flew to Al Minhad Air Base in Dubai, our staging post in the Middle East, my last stop before returning to Australia.

Kathryn and I had been together for several years by then, and I supposed that after spending a certain amount of time with a woman, the next logical step would be to get engaged and then married. I had no concept of what a normal family life looked like and I knew little or nothing about relationships, but I was sure I loved her.

Cashed up with eight months worth of tax-free pay and combat allowances, I went to Aussie Mike’s jewellery shop, sometimes known as Crazy Mike’s, in Dubai, looking for a ring or a diamond I could have made into an engagement ring.

It was odd being around people again, so many of them, in another foreign country. The Arab salesman at Aussie Mike’s greeted me like a long-lost friend and showed me a diamond.

‘How much?’

‘For you, a mere $8000, sir. Finest quality.’

Fuck, I thought. It was tiny. Was this really what eight grand, in US dollars, bought you? How much was it going to cost me to get enough of those little stones to make a ring out of?

With a bit of cajoling from the salesman and enough token bargaining from me to make me feel like I hadn’t been completely ripped off, I ended up buying a 1.3 carat diamond for US$10,000. As I handed over the money, I prayed that I wasn’t being set up and had not just bought a fake, but plenty of guys had recommended Crazy Mike’s. *Who was the crazy one now?* I wondered.

I hoped to surprise Kathryn with the ring, which I wanted made in the same design that Kathryn’s father had given to her mother. I contacted Kathryn’s mother and asked her to transfer some money to me from our account. I gave her the password, but she forgot it, couldn’t get back to me in time, and ended up having to ask Kathryn for it!

I also later realised that I had been comparing the size of the diamonds to my fat fingers, not Kathryn, and the ring actually ended up looking good on her hand.

When I returned to Australia, I was given stand-down leave, yet another stumbling block to catching up with the rest of the guys I had served with. They were all either off on leave or posted out to other units.

I proposed to Kathryn on the banks of the Brisbane River and she said yes, but as had been the case throughout our relationship, before we had time to reconnect, I was sent away again. I was ninety per cent sure that I was going to discharge from the army, but as soon as I returned to duty, I was pressured into going on a promotion course. Although I was a full corporal, with two stripes, I had still only done the first of the two promotion courses that I needed to complete to have a substantive rank and a higher pay grade. I had done Subject 1 for Corporal, which covers the skills all NCOs throughout the army need but, ironically, after eight months in Afghanistan, I still needed to qualify as an Infantry Corporal by completing Subject 2, the corps-specific course.

The problems I’d had with my legs between my time in Iraq and my first tour of Afghanistan had flared up again, exacerbated by the punishment I had put myself through during the battle at Derapet. I had been in pain for some time.

Subject 2 was about infantry tactics and leading soldiers. I had done all that, for real, and much more, but I had to go through the motions of re-learning all this back-to-basics crap. In true army style, the finale of the course was doing a twenty-kilometre march in full pack and webbing.

‘I can’t do that,’ I said to the instructor.

‘Why not?’

‘My leg is fucked.’

‘Then what are you doing here?’

‘I was forced to come here.’

It was nuts. I had exposed myself to enemy fire, called in fire on machine-gun positions and seen a friend die in combat, and I was being told I could not hold the rank I already had unless I walked twenty kilometres. I wanted to scream at someone, but who would listen? In the end, I was given a pass.

If I expected sympathy from my battalion, the place I had called home for ten years, then I was out of luck. I put in an application for long service leave, which I was due, and was told by a warrant officer that it would not be approved – there were exercises to be attended and other duties I had to perform, there would be no special treatment for me.

In anger, I put in an application to discharge from the army altogether. While I had harboured desires of applying for Special Forces, I was realistic enough to know that even with surgery I would not pass the gruelling selection tests.

I was called to into see the commanding officer of the battalion, a Lieutenant Colonel.

The CO asked me if there was anything else I wanted to do in the army, if there was any course or anything else he could offer within his power to make me stay. ‘We can give you a break, if you like.’

The CO was offering me carrots, but as soon as I left his office there was a warrant officer waiting with a stick.

‘Corporal Keighran,’ he said to me, ‘there’s been a soldier charged with sleeping on picket and you are going to be his defending officer when it goes to hearing.’

‘I’m sorry, I can’t do that.’

‘You *will* do it.’

‘Well,’ I replied, ‘I’ve been talking to the CO and . . .’

‘What do you mean you’ve been talking to the CO?’

‘Let me finish,’ I said to him, which was not the way I would have dared talk to a warrant officer when I joined the army ten years earlier. ‘I’ve put in an application for my long service leave and then I’m going to discharge.’

‘You can’t do that.’

‘I’ve done it. I’m gone.’

He was fuming, but there was nothing he could do. I had gone via the chain of command and it wasn’t up to him whether I went on leave or not, but he had pushed me into a corner and I had made my decision.

I marked time around the barracks for two more weeks and then went off on long service leave.

*

I spent a lot of time doing nothing during my long service leave. I also thought that four months would give me enough time to do my own transition from the army to civilian life and find myself a job.

Grandad had said that there would come a time when I would be ready to leave and, my sour ending with the warrant officer notwithstanding, he had been right. My good friends Marcus Randall and Matt Hutton had already got out and both had taken on mature-age apprenticeships. I had probably stayed on too long, extending in order to be able to complete that second tour of Afghanistan. I did not regret leaving, but nor did I think my mates had made the wrong decision. We were all moving on – Marcus was going to marry Hayley while I was on leave and Kathryn and I had set a date in November 2011 for our wedding.

Kathryn would often come home from her job at the bank to find me unshowered, dressed in trackie pants and playing *World of Warcraft* but during the day I had also cleaned the house, often cooked dinner, and scoured the job ads for something I could do.

Other than the fact that Crash had died and I had done something stupid on top of a hill, Kathryn knew nothing about what had gone on at Derapet and I saw no reason to tell her. Unlike a lot of veterans, I was not troubled by or suffering from what I had seen and done in Afghanistan.

True, it had been harder for me to readjust to life at home in Australia after the 2010 tour, but I put that down to the acrimonious circumstances under which I'd left the army, and the fact that I'd missed out on the chance to decompress and spend time with the people I'd gone through those experiences with.

I went to the movies by myself one day. As the film began, a couple of young teenage kids in the row behind carried on talking. I turned around and glared at them.

'If you don't shut the fuck up, you better get out of here before something happens,' I said to one of them.

His eyes widened in terror in the dark; he could tell I was serious. Before anything else could happen, however, *I* got up and left the cinema. I knew I was in the wrong and had overreacted, and I had to remove myself from the situation before it escalated.

Marcus and Hayley's wedding at least gave me the chance to reconnect with some old mates.

Marcus had already quizzed me about what had happened at Derapet, when we'd got together with a bunch of friends for another wedding not long after I returned from Afghanistan, when I first went on long service leave.

'What the fuck did you do over there?' Marcus said to me over a beer at the reception. 'There's a rumour going around that you've been nominated for a VC.'

‘Nah, mate,’ I said to him. ‘I just did my job.’

I didn’t want to talk up what had happened. It was all too raw. Sure, I was aware of the rumours that Fanning and Lanigan, as our senior people at Derapet on the day, had nominated several people for awards, but no-one had said anything to me about a Victoria Cross.

Just before Marcus’s wedding, I had surgery on my other shin. I was on crutches and not well enough to go out on Marcus’s bucks night, but I did fly to Fiji for the wedding. I probably shouldn’t have travelled, as I ended up with a staph infection before travelling, but it was good to have some beers again with Hutto and Marcus and to celebrate his marriage to Hayley.

There was some talk about what had gone on in Afghanistan, but I just brushed it off. It was something that had happened in my past and I just wanted to get on with life.

*

When my long service leave was up, I discharged formally from the army. There was no ceremony or presentation and the certificate of service I eventually received had my name misspelled on it.

I left the army with plenty of operational experience in war zones, but in terms of qualifications of interest to the civilian world, all I had was an army driver’s licence. I paid for myself to do a heavy vehicle course and got my HR, heavy rigid, driver’s licence, figuring that might help me get a job driving trucks on the mines, which was where I hoped to end up. People said the money was good in mining, but it seemed everyone else had the same idea.

I also did a short course in building and paid a professional résumé-writing service to get my CV in order, and sent off four job applications for labouring, mining and driving jobs. I did not receive a single reply. Finding a job was proving to be a lot harder than I had imagined.

Perhaps I was underselling myself, or maybe I thought my time in the army was worth more to a prospective employer than it really was, but whatever the case, I was going nowhere. I was still on full pay from the army, but my long service leave was about to run out. I had transitioned to the Army Reserve and paraded a couple of times with 25/49 Battalion, Royal Queensland Regiment, but aside from my part-time army pay, it looked like I would soon be earning nothing.

In desperation, I reached out to a few old army friends and learned that Graham Blake was dating the daughter of a guy who owned a drilling company in Western Australia.

‘Is there any work going?’ I asked Blakey over the phone.

‘Yeah, mate, plenty. Come on over.’

That was all the encouragement I needed. When Kathryn came home from work that day, I told her my plan, such as it was.

‘I’m going to WA, because there’s work over there. I’ll get some experience and I’ll come back.’

I packed a swag in the back of my ute and set off. I was so keen for work, and I was so worried Blakey’s offer might suddenly disappear, that I made it from Brisbane to Adelaide in one very long day of driving.

The next morning, I was up at three and back on the road in the dark. When I was tired, I would pull over and get out my jetboiler from my army days and brew up a cup of coffee. On my second and third nights, I stopped in the middle of nowhere, unrolled my swag on the side of the road and went to sleep under the stars, just like I’d done when I was in uniform.

Barrelling across the Nullarbor Plain, I was pulled over for speeding.

‘Where are you going in such a bloody hurry?’ the traffic cop asked me.

‘I just got out of the army and I’m heading to Kalgoorlie to try and find a job.’

The police officer went back to his patrol car, checked me out on his computer and returned with my driver’s licence but, thankfully, no fine. ‘Alright. Off you go, but stop fucking speeding.’

I made it to Blakey’s place in Kalgoorlie in three days and stayed with him that night. The next day, he took me to the office to meet his girlfriend’s dad and then out to the drilling rig, which was working close to town. I was given a job on the spot and although I was tired after my long journey, I started work after lunch that day.

I started off as an offsider, or bag snatcher. The job was as simple as it was demanding: as the drilling rig pierced the earth's surface, dirt and rock samples were brought up and caught in a bag and I had to remove the bag, load it on a truck and then fit a new one.

It was the hardest fucking job I've ever done in my life. Each bag weighed between fifty and sixty kilograms and I was lugging them to the truck continually, all day. In between carrying, I was learning how to be a rod handler, how to fit another drill rod for every three metres of depth that the drill went down into the earth – even more lifting and carrying.

Where the drill rig went, I went. I slept in my swag on the ground or sometimes in a shearing shed. I was away in the bush for days on end, with nothing to spend my money on. In many ways, it was like being back in the army, but I saw this as a means to an end, a way to get some experience that might lead to a job in a mine, where I'd be on good money – the bagman's wage was not good – and living in a mining camp.

We had a high turnover of workers in that job, but I stuck with it; I was just grateful to have employment and I was sending money back to Kathryn in Brisbane to help pay for our upcoming wedding. Even so, it was tough on her.

'I thought things would be better when you got out of the army,' she said to me on the phone one day, when I was somewhere with reception, 'but this is just as bad.'

In a way, it was. I was away for weeks on end, out of contact. Hutto, who was to be my best man, took the brunt of Kathryn's frustrations and my not being around to help plan the wedding, and Rando came round to mow the lawn every now and then.

Blakey's partner, Roxy, and I started checking out houses for rent in Kalgoorlie in preparation for Kathryn to join me in the West. Eventually we found a run-down little two-bedroom weatherboard and tin-roofed house. Kathryn organised the lease by phone and email.

She took leave without pay from her job in Brisbane, not quite sure that we would make a go of it in Kalgoorlie, and took a respectable four days to drive across the country to Western Australia with our dog, a staffy named Barra.

Kathryn had held a good position in the bank in Brisbane, but finding work in the West was not easy for her at first. She completed a TAFE course in Human Resources and ended up getting a job at the Goldfields TAFE, itself in Kalgoorlie. Our house was tiny compared to the place in Petrie, with a dodgy air conditioner that meant it was stifling in summer and freezing on winter nights. However, we both had work.

I had transferred to a Kalgoorlie-based Army Reserve unit, 11/28 Battalion, Royal West Australian Regiment and in between drilling jobs I paraded with my new unit, on the odd weeknight and weekend. Most of my fellow soldiers were working in the mines and I struck up a friendship with a bloke named Dean Collins, who was ex-regular navy and had transferred to the army. He was a shift boss for a mining company, La Mancha Resources, and he said he would put in a word for me with his company.

About six months after Kathryn had moved over, Dean came through, giving me the heads-up that the company would soon be looking for people. I applied online and got a job driving trucks underground, bringing ore up above ground from the Frog’s Leg goldmine. I was given six months probation, which I passed, and ended up with a full-time job. Things were finally looking up.

*

We were married in November that year, but as I was not long into the new job, I couldn’t afford to take time for a honeymoon.

Even though I was against it, Mum had wanted Cowboy to be at the wedding, so he was there, though I was able to stop him from making a speech. I had no love for him, but Mum, clearly, still carried a flicker of a torch for him despite how badly he had treated her.

As soon as I had left for the army, at seventeen, he had left her on her own at Lowmead. There had been a young woman working at the property, supposedly learning about horses, and Cowboy had got her pregnant. He had taken off, moved in with her, and I now had a half-brother, named Ethan.

Cowboy knew Mum’s routine, how she went shopping in Bundaberg once a week, and while she was away on her first trip after he had left her, he snuck back to the farm and stole all the solar panels and batteries from the house. Mum was livid and she knew it was him. She called the police and eventually they found him and forced him to give the stuff back.

Things continued to go from bad to worse between them. He’d had a few illegal firearms at the house and I later learned that at one point Mum had feared for her life and had gathered up all his guns and surrendered them to the police. They had always fought, but she had obviously been scared enough to act. Despite all this, I think she always had and always would love him.

*

In the new year, I began working underground, in a new, better job, setting explosive charges to blast the rock from the underground face in the goldmine.

There had been a big blue at the Christmas party at the mine and a few blokes had started punching on, leading to three of them getting the sack. Their misfortune created an opportunity for me to move from driving trucks to blasting.

The work was more interesting and better paid. There is also something deeply satisfying about blowing shit up.

Marcus has a great memory of Crash, from early on in our careers, when we had all been off doing specialist courses. I had done a mortar course, Marcus went to the reconnaissance platoon and Crash had qualified as an assault pioneer, the infantry’s version of an engineer. As a pioneer, Crash learned to work with explosives and Marcus remembers him letting out a devilish laugh, like a mad scientist, as he explained how in preparation for some life-like pyrotechnics during an exercise, he was going to bury an explosive charge in a hole and top it up with petrol and diesel to give an atomic effect.

For Kathryn and me our routine became about working and saving for a better life. We had moved our lives from one side of the country to the other and had not even had the luxury that most couples have, of time away on holiday together. It wasn’t a great existence, but at least I had a steady job.

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Every Australia Day, on 26 January, a raft of honours and awards are announced for civilians, military and other uniformed people who have done something meritorious or out of the ordinary.

There had been plenty of talk after Derapet, rumours mostly, about who had been nominated for what. I was pretty sure my name had gone into the hat, so I thought I might get something, maybe a commendation or possibly a Medal for Gallantry.

Kathryn and I went through the newspaper on Australia Day 2012. James Fanning received the Distinguished Service Medal for staying calm and composed under fire and directing the battle from our side; Sean Lanigan and Paul Langer were both awarded the Medal for Gallantry, for their action in the aqueduct, pushing forward and taking out a Taliban machine-gun position; and Parks received a Commendation for Gallantry for his part in moving on to the hill under fire and continuing to lay down fire support with his MAG58, under fire.

My name was missing from the list.

Kathryn was disappointed on my behalf and I later found out that Fanning received several irate phone calls from guys who had been there, asking why I had been overlooked, when he and the others had received awards.

I was philosophical about it all. Sure, it would have been nice to get some recognition, but perhaps the powers that be had decided that what I had done was just reckless and stupid rather than brave. My actions could have backfired disastrously – if I had been hit on one my runs up the hill, I might have necessitated a second casevac, exposing many more people to danger to get me out. Or, of course, I could have just been killed. I was thankful that at least some of the other guys had received something for the work they did.

The army hadn’t even been able to spell my name correctly when I discharged, so while I was disappointed, I was not overly surprised I’d been overlooked for a medal.

In any case, I hadn’t done what I did to get an award. What I did at Derapet was a more dangerous version of what I’d done when I rode my horse in between Mum and the charging bull – I stood up on that hill, because it was the only thing to do at the time.

TWENTY

One unremarkable day in late September 2012, I knocked off, had a shower at work and drove home to the shitty little house Kathryn and I now called home. It was warming up, and there was barely a hint of a breeze coming through the pressed-tin louvres on the windows.

Kathryn and I had sat down to dinner when, at about 6.30 pm, the phone rang.

‘Hello?’ I said, not recognising the number.

‘Corporal Daniel Keighran?’

‘Yeah?’

‘This is Lieutenant General David Morrison, Chief of Army.’

‘What? Who?’ I said, immediately thinking one of my mates was setting me up.

‘General Morrison. Chief of Army.’

I’d never met him, but he sounded serious. My next thought was. *What have I done wrong*? I felt a flush of panic as my mind raced through everything I’d done on that last tour of Afghanistan. Every contact and every patrol flashed past as if on fast-forward. I wondered if we had inadvertently killed some civilians during the Battle of Derapet. The Taliban’s PR machine had tried to claim that we were responsible for the IED that their fighters had set, the one that had blown up the minibus just before we left Anar Juy. Was there going to be an investigation into me, as there had been into the actions of other Australian soldiers who had served in Afghanistan?

‘You’ve been nominated for a bravery award,’ General Morrison said, filling the void my silence had created. ‘It’s come to my attention that it was delayed, but you’ll hear from someone soon. Apologies for taking so long.’

I was stunned. ‘Um, no worries, thanks for your time, Sir.’

‘Who was that?’ Kathryn asked as I ended the call.

I told her what he had said, and that I didn’t know what the award was.

‘You’ve been out of the army for two years already. It’s about time this was done with,’ she said.

I felt weird. After the Australia Day honours had come and gone, I had given up thinking about Derapet and what had gone on. I couldn’t shake the feeling that all was not as General Morrison had said, and that somehow I had done something wrong.

I tried to put it all out of my mind again.

Two weeks later, I was at work and had been underground, but had come up to the surface during my shift while we waited to blast. I happened to be at my locker at 10.30 am when my mobile phone rang. I answered it.

‘It’s the Chief of Army here again,’ David Morrison said.

The panic hit me again. Something was wrong. If they weren’t sending the military police to come and get me, then perhaps they had changed their mind about giving me an award and Morrison was calling to tell me off, for being stupid in battle.

‘What?’ was all I could manage.

‘I’ve got the jet today,’ he said. ‘Where are you? In Kalgoorlie?’

‘What do you mean “I’ve got the jet”?’ I asked him.

‘I’m going to come to Kalgoorlie and see you.’

What the fuck? I thought. He was a general and I was an Army Reservist, so still under his overall command, but I also had a job, which had not been easy to get. If I’d thought back then that ten years in the army including stints overseas fighting in the war against terror meant anything to an employer, then I’d been wrong, and General Morrison needed to understand some of that as well.

‘I’m working today, on the mine site, I’m not sure if that’s achievable,’ I said to him.

There was a pause. Generals are not used to corporals saying no to them.

‘I think it would behove you to get to the airport at Kalgoorlie and meet me.’

‘I’ll have to talk to ask the shift boss to see if someone can cover for me,’ I said to him. ‘I have to charge and blast, today. I can’t just walk out. Hang on.’

I can only imagine his face as I put him on hold and went next door to the manager’s office. As it happened, my friend and fellow Army Reservist Dean was on duty that day.

‘Dean, I’ve got the Chief of Army on the line, mate.’ Standing in his doorway, I held up my phone, on mute. ‘Can you just talk to him for me? He wants to come to Kalgoorlie to see me.’

Dean just stared at me. ‘What do you fucking mean he’s coming to Kalgoorlie?’

Dean came to me, took my phone and retreated into his office. I waited just outside.

Dean came out. ‘Yes, mate, you’d better get into town, to the airport. He’ll be here in a couple of hours.’

Now I was really worried. I couldn’t shake the feeling that Morrison was in fact coming out to take me away or deliver bad news.

I was in my overalls, covered and dust and explosives. If I went to the airport like this, I’d probably set off a bomb scanner.

I called Kathryn and told her what had just happened. She had the day off work and had been out with some girlfriends the night before. They’d had a huge night and when I’d left for work that morning it was clear that Kathryn was going to spend the day nursing a serious hangover.

‘You need to get ready, do something about yourself,’ I said to her.

‘The house is a mess,’ she said to me. ‘He doesn’t want to come here, does he? I can cope with having a shower, but I cannot cope with cleaning the house. Please tell me he doesn’t want to come to the house, Dan!’

‘No, just the airport.’

I found one of the other guys, told him I needed to leave work, and gave him a handover. I showered and changed, drove home, picked up Kathryn and then went to the airport.

There were no flights coming or going when we arrived, and the single-storey airport terminal was empty, except for staff, some of whom were curious to see a RAAF VIP jet aircraft land and taxi up to the building.

General Morrison, his female aide-de-camp and the Regimental Sergeant Major of the Army all got out and walked across the tarmac. There was a moment of awkwardness as one of the workers in the terminal had to find a key to let them in through the glass door, but once in, they strode across to where Kathryn and I were waiting.

After brief introductions, we went to the airport cafeteria. Curious staff looked on from a distance as General Morrison handed me a letter. 'You need to read this.'

Kathryn and I sat at a table and I opened the letter. It was from Stephen Brady, the Official Secretary to the Governor-General of Australia, Quentin Bryce, on behalf of her.

The letter was straight to the point.

It is my honour and great pleasure to inform you that Her Majesty the Queen has approved that you be awarded the Victoria Cross for Australia.

The letter outlined, briefly, why I had been nominated and made it clear that I had the option of declining the medal. There was an acceptance form attached, which I had to tick for 'Yes' or 'No'. If I said no, according to the form, no one would know that I had been nominated. General Morrison, seated opposite me, handed me a pen.

'Here you go,' he said.

I had only just finished reading the letter. I was like, *Fuck, what do I do*?

I looked at the general. 'But I haven't had a chance to talk to my team, everyone who was there. What does this mean?'

He gave me a frank look. 'This is going to change your life.'

'What does *that* mean?'

I was through with the army – I was also thinking about of transitioning out of the Reserve, breaking my ties completely. I was barely doing the minimum twenty days of service per year to stay active.

General Morrison said nothing more. I looked at the pen. Although I had a choice, to say yes or no to the highest award for valour in the country, I got the distinct feeling that saying no was not an option. I was being asked to make the decision there and then on the spot, without time to sleep on it or discuss it with Kathryn or anyone else.

I signed the letter and, literally, ticked the box that said I would accept the award.

General Morrison took the piece of paper off me. ‘You can’t tell anyone else about this. Someone will be in contact with you soon and the investiture will happen quickly.’

I just looked at him and nodded.

‘I’ll be in touch,’ he said as he and his party got up to leave. Once more, he said to me, ‘This will change your life.’

TWENTY-ONE

‘Holy shit, they’re giving you the VC!’ Kathryn shrieked, once the official party had left and we were alone.

It was too soon for the news to even sink in. We drove home and curled up on the couch together.

‘Okay,’ I said to her, ‘now I have to tell you what happened.’

I had not told the story of what happened at Derapet on that August day in 2010 to anyone. I was still slightly bitter that I hadn’t even spoken to most of the guys who were with me there since we’d all come home. The army had scattered us, and others, like me, had left.

Kathryn listened as I related how and why I had done what I did, running up and down to the crest of the hill, how Crash had died, and how many other people that day had done incredible things under extreme pressure. When I was done Kathryn told me she was glad that I was not in the army anymore and that she didn’t need to worry about me doing anything like that again. She was supportive and proud.

As Lieutenant General Morrison had promised, we were contacted very soon after he had left us, and I had to go to work the next day and ask for more time off.

Dean and the company as a whole were fantastic. The fact that Dean was in the Army Reserve really helped. ‘Mate,’ I said to him, ‘I can’t tell you what it’s about, but there’s something I’d really like you and your wife to come to, in Canberra, soon.’

He grinned at me, knowing it would have to be something big: ‘Yep, I’m in.’

Within a couple of days, a team from Canberra descended on a secret mission to our tiny miner’s cottage in Kalgoorlie.

Stephen Brady, Sharon Prendergast from Honours and Awards and Nishara Miles, the army's senior communications adviser, arrived to prepare Kathryn and me for the whirlwind that was about to pick our lives up and spin us around at a million miles an hour.

Even before they entered our modest home, they were sizing it up, like generals doing an appreciation of an impending battle.

'You can't stay here,' Nishara, who was in charge of media relations, said to Kathryn and me.

'Why not?' Kathryn asked. As basic as it was, this was our home.

Nishara explained that as there was no fence out the front of our house that television camera crews would be able to come right up to our windows, to invade our privacy.

We looked at each other. Neither of us had thought about the media storm that was heading out way.

We all sat down in the lounge room.

'Right,' Nishara said, 'tell me everything.'

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'I need to know everything about you, your military service, your family, all of it.'

She explained that I was about to go into the spotlight and under the media microscope as journalists sought to learn everything they could about me. If there was dirt to be found, in my personal life or in the pictures I had posted on social media, they would find it.

Where do I start? I thought.

When I told them about my family and got to the bit about my dad being shot, Nish's face fell. I left out the bit about watering his dope plantation.

'No-one will be able to find him,' I said of my father, trying to reassure Nishara. 'Dad's offline, off the grid, he's got no social media presence. He's got a mobile that he probably doesn't even know the number of. You would have to be standing in whatever pub he's in, next to him, to find him.'

Nishara did not look convinced.

'Oh, and he's got another kid now,' I added, telling her about how he had run off with the young horsewoman.

While Nishara tried to digest the mess that was my family life, Stephen and Sharon explained the protocol of the investiture, which was to be a major production in itself. Kathryn and I would be able to invite close friends and our families to Canberra, but we were under strict instructions not to tell any of them the purpose of their visit. Everyone would be expected to dress appropriately for the occasion.

I wondered how the fuck I was going to afford to fly my family and friends to Canberra for a ceremony. What I didn't realise until later was that the army would pay for everyone to get there. At the time, it was all too much to comprehend.

I was told to wipe my social media accounts, to take down my Facebook profile and other traces of the real me online. Defence was setting up a wall around me, ostensibly for my own good.

It was one thing saying I could invite friends to come to the investiture, but another to get them to Canberra. Marcus and Matt – Rando and Hutto – my best friends, had left the army, so couldn't just be ordered to be there.

I called Marcus. 'Mate, I'd like to meet up with you, soon, and this invitation extends to Hayley as Kathryn would like her there as well.'

'What is it?' Marcus asked. 'Have you two got big news?'

'I can't say, mate.'

'I don't know, mate,' Marcus said. 'I haven't got much leave in my book, but I'm sure Hayley could come over and see Kathryn.'

I wished I could tell him more, even that I needed him to go to Canberra, but I couldn't even tell him that just yet. 'Mate, this meeting will take place in a different location to where I am now. I'll be getting there a week before.'

There was a pause on the other end of the line. The penny was dropping for Marcus 'Does this location start with a "C", as in Canberra?'

'Can't say.' I was grinning now.

'Are you fucking serious?'

I held the line. 'I'm not saying a thing.'

'Holy shit, this is ridiculous, mate. This is the greatest thing ever!'

Hutto was even more direct when I called him to give him the veiled invitation to Canberra.

‘It’s about fucking time,’ he said.

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James Fanning and Tim Hurley, the commander of the LAV call sign Victor One-One, were still in the army and ordered to report to Canberra on the appropriate day. Being in uniform, they didn’t need to be given a reason why they were to leave their units with no notice.

I later found out that Fanning and Sean Lanigan had put their heads together after the battle at Derapet to make some recommendations for awards. Fanning’s strategy had been to recognise several members of the patrol, but to put me up for the highest award. He nominated me for a Star of Gallantry, which is second only to the Victoria Cross. He figured, sensibly, that if he aimed for something realistic it would either come through or my award might be downgraded to the next level, a Medal for Gallantry, and that would be a good result.

As he tells the story, he later spoke to Major General John Cantwell, who was the commander of the Australian forces in Afghanistan during our tour, and asked him about the nomination. General Cantwell told Fanning that my nomination for a Star of Gallantry had landed on his desk not long after Ben Roberts-Smith, a corporal in the SAS, had been nominated for a VC.

General Cantwell, along with my commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Mark Jennings, discussed the nomination and both agreed that it was worthy of a Victoria Cross, rather than a Star of Gallantry. General Cantwell signed off on the revised nomination.

It may sound unbelievable to a civilian, but anyone who has ever had anything to do with the defence force will probably not be surprised to learn that my nomination for a Victoria Cross for Australia, the highest award for gallantry in the country, was then lost, stuck on someone’s desk or in someone’s inbox in Canberra, and never actioned.

That was the reason why my name was skipped from the Australia Day honours list in 2012, and the mid-year honours. As well as James and some of the other guys asking questions about what had happened to my award, Mark Jennings contacted John Cantwell, who by that time had retired from the army. Mark and John resubmitted the nomination for the VC, with John once more signing off on the paperwork, this time as a civilian. That was why General Morrison had apologised in his first phone call to me. You know it's a pretty big fuck-up when a general has to apologise to a corporal, but the good thing was that the people in my chain of command had done the right thing by me – twice.

The news was starting to sink in, even though part of me still couldn't quite believe it. Travelling to Canberra – I went over before Kathryn while she organised her own leave – made it more real in some ways and yet surreal at the same time.

I was taken to Government House, the residence of Governor-General Quentin Bryce, and shown to a beautiful cottage in the grounds. This would be where Kathryn and I would be cocooned until after the investiture ceremony.

When Kathryn arrived, she was impressed by the cottage. 'But where do we eat?'

I took her to the kitchen and opened the fridge, revealing its contents. 'There's a chef who filled this up with food for us. There's even salmon and fancy little snacks.'

'Wow.'

Our world was changing already. We had a full schedule of preparation and rehearsals for the investiture. Both of us were taken to a mock TV studio where we were given media training, assaulted with a barrage of tough, sometimes rude, questions by someone playing the part of a persistent journalist. We were literally subjected to the glare of hot lights as we were drilled in how to answer questions and stick to key messages.

Halfway through her session, Kathryn called a timeout. 'Maybe I'm just not going to talk to the media.' She looked to me. 'I'll leave that up to you.'

Kathryn had brought her best outfit to wear to the investiture, but during one of the preparation sessions she was told that it wasn't appropriate, and that she would be taken shopping to find something more fitting for the occasion. She was stoic, taking it in her stride, but I felt for her, knowing how something like that could hurt.

I remembered General Morrison's repeated words, that this award would change my life. It would change my wife's life as well.

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Now that period of my life – so important, so pivotal – is a blur, a series of snapshots, some funny, some annoying, some terrifying.

I met Quentin Bryce and she was gracious and charming. We did a rehearsal for the investiture the day before and she was wonderful, doing her best to put me at ease. I didn't realise then just how important this woman, a fellow Queenslander, would be in my life in the years to come.

Kathryn and I had invited our families to Canberra, and I had reluctantly included my father. Cowboy promised me that he owned a suit but arrived in an old pair of jeans and a flannelette shirt. I would have to pay for a new outfit for him and my mum.

'I do *not* trust that man with our credit card,' Kathryn said, wisely. She sent her father out with him to choose a suit, tie, shirt, shoes and socks, while she took my mother and sister clothes shopping. It was good to have my sister, Susan, there as it had been a while since we had seen each other.

The night before the investiture, we had a dinner at Government House, with our families, and Hutto, who was staying with us at the cottage. Finally, I was allowed to give the news that some, though by no means all of them, had guessed.

I clinked a glass with a fork and stood up. 'Thanks everyone for coming. Tomorrow I'm going to be invested with the Victoria Cross for Australia.'

My mates were over the moon and Kathryn's parents, who had a background in Defence, were very impressed. I looked at my mother and father and I could tell that they didn't really appreciate the significance of the award. I got the distinct feeling Cowboy’s mind was turning over, wondering how he might benefit from my big news.

The conversation carried on over the meal and drinks, and my mum stole the show for a moment when she had her own light bulb moment.

‘Dan,’ she said, ‘you know my favourite movie?’

I did. Her all-time favourite motion picture was the old war film *Zulu*, starring Michael Caine, about the Battle of Rorke’s Drift in South Africa, where eleven Victoria Crosses were earned by British forces fighting Zulu warriors in 1879.

Her eyes widened. ‘You’re getting the same medal that all those people got in *Zulu*!’

‘Yes, Mum,’ I said, as the laughter echoed around the dining room.

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After the dinner, there was still work to do. I’d been given the media release that Defence wanted to issue the next morning, after the ceremony.

Hutto was sitting next to me as I read through the draft.

‘I still feel like they’re going to come to me tomorrow and call it off, and say they made a mistake,’ I said to him.

‘Mate, they don’t accidentally give out a VC,’ Hutto said.

I took a pen to the printout of the media release. ‘They’re trying make it sound like I did what I did because I knew it was Crash, that I acted that way because it was a mate of mine. I didn’t.’

Hutto nodded.

‘They’re trying to Hollywood-up this thing. It’s media spin.’

‘I know, mate,’ Hutto said.

He knew the truth, that I had done what needed to be done and that probably anyone on the patrol would have done the same thing to help anyone who had been wounded, regardless of how well we knew the wounded man.

‘I still don’t think I deserve it,’ I said.

‘You do.’

I made some more changes to the media release, making sure it acknowledged what everyone did that day. It was good having my friends with me and I was looking forward to seeing the rest of the team the next morning.

But there was one person missing.

I can only imagine Grandad’s reaction if he had been there. He would have made sure he had his own suit and looked the part, maybe even wearing his medals at the investiture.

I wondered how proud he might have been of what I had done, for he alone in my family would have understood the significance of what was about to happen, and I wondered what he might have said to me.

TWENTY-TWO

When I entered the hall in Government House, I glanced around and saw, among my family and friends and a range of dignitaries who had been invited, the rest of the team who had been with me at Derapet.

I had been told, given instructions like a child, not to talk to them on the way in or if I saw them before the investiture. What the fuck were they so afraid of? What did they think I was going to say to these men who I had gone into battle with, who had faced death that day alongside me?

I was nervous and, while I was sure my face was pale and my skin clammy, I think I was in a bit better shape than some of the blokes from my old team, who winked and smiled back at me as I walked past them. Judging by the way they looked, they'd had their own reunion last night and quite a few beers. I learned later that Tim Hurley had to be dressed by a couple of the guys that morning.

I wasn't the only one who suffered from pre-investiture jitters. Six days before the event, on Friday 26 October, Sharon Prendergast from Honours and Awards had been assured that my Victoria Cross for Australia, freshly minted by Hancock's Jewellers of London, the sole manufacturer of the medals, had been put on a plane to Australia.

Sharon had arrived at her office on Monday morning, expecting to collect the medal, but it hadn't arrived. What followed were three days and nights of near-constant emailing and phone calls trying to track down the VC. The time difference between Australia and the UK meant that Sharon was literally up at all hours emailing and phoning people. The courier company at first assured Sharon that the medal, part of a consignment of other items, had left the UK, but it turned out it was still at Heathrow Airport.

With time ticking away, Sharon and her team had to prepare for the worst and formulate some contingency plans about how to get the medal to Australia, and what to do if it didn't arrive in time. Postponing the ceremony was an absolute last resort, given the number of dignitaries who were there and, of course, everyone else who had been summoned from across the country. Finally, the VC was found and put on a flight to Australia, due to arrive in Sydney just after dawn on the day of the investiture!

Leaving nothing to chance, as final preparations were being made for the ceremony, Sharon and a colleague asked the staff at Government House if they could have a close look at a display of replica medals mounted on the wall. Obligingly, the display was taken down and Sharon, to the mild confusion of the people around her, took it to her office where she quietly removed the replica Victoria Cross for Australia – just in case. Fortunately, as I was getting dressed into my uniform that morning, the medal was winging its way from Sydney to Canberra Airport, where it was collected by a very relieved Sharon.

The place was full of VIPs, including the prime minister, Julia Gillard, and opposition leader, Tony Abbott.

Stephen Brady welcomed everyone. 'It's not often in this town that a secret holds,' he told the Canberra crowd, 'but this one has. We gather for an event of real national significance, the bestowal of a Victoria Cross for Australia.'

Stephen explained that as of today, ninety-nine Australians would have been awarded the Victoria Cross, including six from the Boer War, sixty-four from World War I – of which nine were earned at Gallipoli – two in the conflict in North Russia in 1919, twenty in World War II, and four in Vietnam. In 1991, the Victoria Cross for Australia had superseded the British award and I was to be the third recipient of that medal. Mark Donaldson, the first VC for Australia holder, was in the audience.

Stephen then introduced the governor-general, Quentin Bryce, who came into the room, and announced that the VC would be presented to me.

As the governor-general stood there, Stephen read out the full citation for my award, giving my name and unit and where I had been based.

On 24 August 2010, he was a member of a partnered fighting patrol with soldiers of the Afghan National Army's 1st Kandak, 4th Brigade, 205th (Hero) Corps, which was engaged by a numerically superior and coordinated enemy attack from multiple firing points in three separate locations.

The attack was initiated by a high volume of sustained and accurate machine-gun and small arms fire which pinned down the combined Australian and Afghan patrol and caused a loss of momentum. In the early stages of the attack, and upon realising that the forward elements of the patrol needed effective fire support, Corporal Keighran and another patrol member moved under sustained and accurate enemy fire to an exposed ridgeline to identify enemy locations and direct the return fire of both Australian and Afghan machine guns.

On reaching this position and with complete disregard for his own wellbeing, Corporal Keighran deliberately drew enemy fire by leaving the limited cover he had and moved over the ridgeline in order to positively identify targets for the machine gunners of the combined patrol.

After identifying some of the enemy firing positions, Corporal Keighran, under persistent enemy fire, continued to lead and mentor his team and move around the ridge to both direct the fire of the Afghan and Australian machine gunners and to move them to more effective firing positions.

As the intensity of enemy fire grew, Corporal Keighran returned to the crest of the ridgeline to identify targets and adjust the fire of Australian light armoured vehicles. His actions resulted in the effective suppression of enemy firing points, which assisted in turning the fight in the favour of the combined patrol.

Moving to a new position, Corporal Keighran deliberately and repeatedly again exposed himself to heavy enemy fire to assist in target identification and the marking of the forward line of troops for fire support elements while simultaneously engaging the enemy.

Realising that the new position provided a better location for the patrol's joint fire controller, Corporal Keighran moved over 100 metres across exposed parts of the ridgeline, attracting a high volume of accurate enemy fire, to locate and move the fire controller to the new position.

He then rose from cover again to expose his position on four successive occasions, each movement drawing more intense fire than the last, in order to assist in the identification of a further three enemy firing points that were subsequently engaged by fire support elements. During one of these occasions, when his patrol sustained an Australian casualty, Corporal Keighran with complete disregard for his own safety, left his position of cover on the ridgeline to deliberately draw fire away from the team treating the casualty. Corporal Keighran remained exposed and under heavy fire while traversing the ridgeline, in order to direct suppressing fire and then assist in the clearance of the landing zone to enable evacuation of the casualty.

Corporal Keighran's acts of the most conspicuous gallantry to repeatedly expose himself to accurate and intense enemy fire, thereby placing himself in grave danger, ultimately enabled the identification and suppression of enemy firing positions by both Australian and Afghan fire support elements. These deliberate acts of exceptional courage in circumstances of great peril were instrumental in permitting the withdrawal of the combined Australian and Afghan patrol with no further casualties. His valour is in keeping with the finest traditions of the Australian Army and the Australian Defence Force. Corporal Daniel Keighran, awarded the Victoria Cross of Australia.

I went to the governor-general, grinning and my face flushed red, and exhaled to try to still my nerves. She welcomed me and told me she had been thinking about me and the Victoria Cross, and what the medal symbolised. She said she held the award in great reverence. It was an immensely humbling moment.

'We honour you, I pin this on you in admiration,' the GG said, as she fixed the medal above my left breast pocket. 'Please accept this on behalf of all our fellow Australians. I do this, yes, with love. I wish you all the very best today and always.'

She shook my hand and we posed for pictures.

I sat down as people applauded. Lieutenant General Morrison, next to me, shook my hand, and Kathryn took my hand as the governor-general began her speech.

'My friends, welcome,' she said, 'Corporal Keighran, welcome. Be assured that if your heart is skipping a beat right now, mine is too.'

I had to smile at that. I thought I was going to have a heart attack. I was still having trouble believing this was all real.

'You would say you're no different from your mates,' she said, 'it's what you're trained for, what you're there for. It wasn't meant to happen, it just happened, and you did what you had to do. And there were other heroes that day.

'That's all true except that what you did that day was different, and acknowledging it here, now, does not diminish the efforts and sacrifices of those who fought beside you. They need you to be here, because by being here the story of that day is told, and through it, their stories are told.'

The governor-general talked a bit about what I had done, and finished up with the following words: 'With this medal, your nation honours you. The Victoria Cross for Australia: the most eminent award our country can bestow. Corporal Daniel Keighran, for Valour.'

Prime Minister Gillard spoke, nailing the fact in her speech that 'pomp and ceremony' did not come naturally to Kathryn and me, Opposition Leader Tony Abbott and Defence Minister Stephen Smith also spoke, as did General David Hurley, the Chief of the Defence Force. At the end of his speech, he put on his slouch hat and came to me.

I stood up from my chair. I knew that there was a tradition that even the most senior officer in the army would salute a Victoria Cross recipient, no matter how junior their rank. However, the Australia Army dress manual states, in fact, that unless a VC holder is an officer, then they should not be saluted. It was up to General Hurley.

‘Stand fast,’ the Chief of the Defence Force said to me, then quietly added: ‘don’t salute back.’

I stood straight, and he saluted me.

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Immediately after the investiture ceremony I was wheeled outside to face a doorstop media conference packed with about twenty reporters and TV cameras.

Even though I had done my best to ensure the media release did not focus on the fact that Crash and I were friends, and that my actions were motivated by what I thought needed to be done, and not by a personal relationship, that was the angle the journalists zeroed in on.

The media training Kathryn and I had been through was tough, but the reality was even more brutal. Several of the reporters persistently tried to draw me into linking what I had done to Crash.

I was brutal back at them. ‘He (Crash) was there that day, he was a good mate of mine and that’s all there is to it.’

Still the questions came, trying to get me to say what they wanted, and I batted them back with the same line, as I had been taught in my media training.

One of the reporters asked me why I kept saying the same thing.

The Chief of Army, General Morrison, stepped in. ‘Because that’s what I told him to say.’

My baptism of fire by media ended after what seemed like an eternity, and I was taken back inside and wheeled around to meet various dignitaries, including Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott.

Prime Minister Gillard impressed me with her knowledge of things on the ground in Afghanistan and to this day I regret that I did not use the occasion to press her on why the handbrake had been put on our military operations. Our government, like the Dutch before us, had lost the appetite for prosecuting the war because of casualties. It would have been hard for a politician to understand that me and the other guys at Derapet who, other than Crash’s family, had been touched by his death more than anyone else in the country, did not see it as a reversal or a reason to pull back – it was the opposite. At the time, we had an Afghan commander who wanted to go into battle for his country and we’d had a plan to go back in to finish the job we had started.

One of the most frustrating things I learned around that time was that 5 RAR, who had taken over from us as the mentoring force, did go back into Derapet and did not meet the sort of opposition that we had. There was a case to be made that we had inflicted much more than a bloody nose on the enemy, that we had severely affected his ability or willingness to stand and fight and that if we had gone back in the next day we might have opened up that valley and gained more ground and more support for the Afghan government.

It seemed I was talking to everyone in Canberra except my mates I had served with, and who had come there to share the big day with me.

‘Relax, just enjoy the day,’ so many well-meaning people had said to me in the lead-up to the investiture, but instead it was feeling more like, ‘Just lie back and take it.’

James Fanning saw what was going on and had taken one of the Government House staff aside and pointed out that the people who had served with me might want to have a quiet word with me.

I found myself being led into a separate room, the governor-general’s private office, and there, beers in hand, were the rest of my team.

Parks, in true form, was sitting in the GG’s chair, pretending to be a general and getting someone to take a picture of him.

The room reeked of booze and I was greeted by smiles and red-rimmed eyes. I was over the moon. I had asked for all of these guys to be here and the army had pulled people from around Australia to make it happen. For many of us, it was the first time we’d seen each other since Afghanistan, two years earlier.

‘I was clearly in the wrong place last night,’ I said, surveying them. ‘I missed a party by the look of it.’

I wished I had been there with them. I was never given the opportunity to ask these men, my fellow team members, what they thought about the nomination.

‘Probably best I didn’t join you last night,’ I carried on, ‘vomiting on TV wouldn’t have been a good look.’

We laughed and chatted and Tar Finnsson, my barracks neighbour from the year 2000 when I’d first arrived at the battalion fresh from infantry training at Singleton, gave me a slap on the back.

‘You’ve come a long way from the digger that marched into 6 RAR all those years ago,’ Tar said. ‘Pity about the red hair.’

‘Clearly, mate, it’s my only flaw,’ I said to the beige man.

I was left with them, while the dignitaries chatted with each other in the main area. It was great.

At the end, Fanning, grinning, pointed to my VC and said: ‘Mate, I’m sorry.’

General Morrison had told me the award would change my life, but James, although joking, had just guessed correctly that not all that changed would be good.

TWENTY-THREE

Australia’s other living Victoria Cross recipients in Australia at the time, Mark Donaldson and Keith Payne, were at the investiture, and Ben Roberts-Smith, whose nomination had been submitted at the same time mine had initially been, sent me a personal message from Afghanistan, where he was still serving with the Special Air Service.

Mark, who was also still in the SAS at the time, took me aside and gave me some advice I have never forgotten.

‘Write back to everyone who writes to you, mate,’ Mark said. ‘Give time to anyone and everyone who wants to stop and talk to you. Sign photos, sign autographs.’

It’s fair to say Mark is a quiet guy, reserved, and no extrovert, so his words carried even more weight, as did his justification for the advice he was giving me.

‘You might be having a bad day,’ he said, ‘but for that person who has taken the time to email you, or worked up the courage to come up to you, a stranger, in a pub, it might be one of the most important things they do in their life and you need to remember that.’

They were sound words and I appreciated them, but I had always been a quieter sort of person, content with my own company. Now I was public property.

That night, after the ceremony, Rando, Hutto and a few of the other boys came back to the cottage in the grounds of Government House. For a moment, I wondered if we would have enough drinks for everyone, but Nishara Miles, reading my mind, came up to me and said, ‘Don’t worry, we’ve got that sorted.’

We carried an esky full of beers from the Government House kitchen down to the cottage and I went into the bedroom and changed out of my service dress uniform into a pair of board shorts, a T-shirt and a pair of thongs.

Nishara came to the cottage later to discuss more forthcoming media arrangements. She looked me up and down and smiled. ‘That’s what we like to see in a VC recipient.’

The news came on the TV and we all watched it. I was all over the broadcasts, even with my poor performance at the media conference.

‘Mate, you even made the headlines over Israel Folau,’ one of the guys said of the often-controversial footballer, who at that time had defected from rugby league to the AFL.

‘There’ll be boozers and streets named after you,’ Rando said. ‘I wonder where Keighran Parade will be. Some shitty little goat track up the back of nowhere.’

We laughed and drank and talked shit. At one point, Marcus took me aside.

‘Mate,’ he said, ‘whatever comes your way from this, don’t ever feel like you’re being greedy, that you can’t take something that’s offered. Do it for all of us, and all your mates. If you say yes to something, if you want to do something, you know, we’ll be behind you.’

The day after the investiture there were more interviews and photo shoots and I was on the evening news program *The Project,* and one of the panel of presenters observed that I seemed less than relaxed.

‘I’d rather be in Afghanistan getting shot at than being here with you guys,’ I said, truthfully.

The media interest didn’t stop at me. As soon as the award was made public, television news crews flew to Kalgoorlie and started looking for people who knew Kathryn and me.

One of my workmates, Tristan Currie, texted me saying there was a reporter in the pub asking about me. ‘What should I say?’ Tristan wrote.

I replied: ‘Mate, make sure you get a beer from them, make sure they pay and then say what you want.’

The media tracked down our neighbours from Petrie in Brisbane and managed to pin down the place of my childhood to Rosedale, where I'd gone to school, rather than Lowmead. Defence let some information trickle out about my family, including the bit about my father organising rodeos and me growing up in a shack with a dirt floor, but none of the stuff about criminal behaviour and growing drugs was released. It was a sanitised, reader-friendly version of my story, the boy from the bush who had made good in the army.

My grandfather and his influence was missing from the headlines – it was all too complicated. I wondered what he would have made of it all if he had been alive to see it.

Kathryn and I went back to Kalgoorlie after the initial frenzy of excitement died down and I went back underground in the mine, blasting. For a time, life was almost normal, although my workmates had plastered a picture of me up on a rock wall underground.

We were living in something of a bubble, however, as Defence Public Affairs was still screening all calls and emails directed to me. It was done to protect our privacy, but in fact I know today that there were offers of jobs and invitations to speak that I never received from that time.

In time, though, the invitations started to reach me, and it soon became clear that a world beyond Kalgoorlie and mining was opening up to me.

Kerry Stokes, the wealthy media owner and military history enthusiast, offered me work at Channel Seven as a guest presenter and I went on a few assignments for them.

Invitations to speaking engagements were pouring in and I found that I didn't mind talking; it gave me a chance to talk about the Battle of Derapet as a whole and the importance of teamwork and leadership, subjects as relevant to the corporate world as they are to the military. A couple of speakers' bureaus put me on their books, and I found that the money was good, as well.

There were also invitations to speak at formal ceremonies, especially around Remembrance Day and Anzac Day. In 2015 I travelled overseas to speak at the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Lone Pine, at Çanakkale –

Gallipoli. With me on that trip were Keith Payne, Mark Donaldson and Doug Baird. Doug's son, Cameron, a corporal in the 2nd Commando Regiment, had received the Victoria Cross posthumously in 2014, in recognition of repeated acts of heroism in a battle at Ghawchak village in Uruzgan, in 2013.

Like Mark, Keith had some good advice for me. Keith has had decades of living with the notion of being public property and he summed up the situation we had both found ourselves in. He said to me, simply: 'You are the custodian of something bigger than yourself.'

There is an association of recipients of the Victoria Cross and the George Cross, and Kathryn and I were invited to the UK, to meet the Queen and other medal holders. The George Cross is the second-highest award for valour for military people and the highest award for bravery for civilians.

In London, I met some inspirational people. Johnson Beharry, born in Grenada, was serving with the British Army in Iraq in 2005 when he was awarded a VC for incredible bravery during two ambushes in which he saved the lives of comrades by exposing himself to enemy fire while driving his damaged armoured personnel carrier – twice – out of the line of enemy fire. He was injured in the second attack, as was Peter Norton, George Cross, an explosive ordnance disposal officer who lost his left leg and part of an arm to an IED in Iraq, but refused to be evacuated until he had given instructions to the rest of his team on how to make the area safe for other soldiers.

So much of my life since I left Lowmead as a seventeen year old had been about expanding my horizons and trying new things and meeting new people, but being invested with the VC was like having a whole new universe opened to me, and a world of new possibilities.

I remember the night before meeting Queen Elizabeth II, Kathryn was up at two or three in the morning, scouring YouTube for videos about how to curtsy properly. Some friends knew where I was going and a few of the boys had urged me to insert some ridiculous word into whatever I said to the Queen, such as 'rad' or something stupid like that.

We went to Buckingham Palace and the experience, like so many others I'd had by then, was other-worldly. I remember being struck by the history, the priceless artwork on the walls, as we walked through and then glancing down to see a dog, one of the Queen's corgis, sprawled out on a mat beside its favourite plastic drinking bowl, licking its arse.

When we were ushered into the Queen's chamber, I looked at the pictures on the tables and other pieces of furniture. Kathryn noticed it as well and we both later remarked how normal and how homely it seemed, for this woman to surround herself with pictures of her children and grandchildren.

'The weather in London is awesome, Your Majesty,' I said to her after we had been introduced. It wasn't 'rad', but it still elicited a funny look from her.

My overwhelming impression of her, as reflected in her pictures, was that for all her presence and the pomp and ceremony that attended our visit, she was as disarming and friendly as any other great-grandmother.

While we were in London, the Victoria Cross and George Cross association arranged for me to visit and be wined and dined in a number of prestigious old clubs, all of which offered me membership. Here was me, a boy from Lowmead in a country descended from convicts, being invited into the private enclaves of the rich and famous.

I made a mental note to myself to not start believing all my own bullshit about what this medal might mean for me.

However, my confidence was growing with every event and with every high-profile leader or politician or celebrity I met.

In Perth, I met Hillary Clinton. 'I'm a bit of a betting man,' I said to her, quietly. 'If I was going to put five dollars on you running again, what do you reckon? Sure thing?' Hillary gave me a wink.

Working in the mines had been similar to being in the army. It was a continuation of the institutionalised life I had lived, away from what most people consider mainstream society. My horizons had been bounded by the rock walls I blasted away at, but the VC was showing me that changing your life can be good, and bad.

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The speaking gigs continued, and the money was excellent. I was also getting other job offers, aside from my part-time work for Channel Seven.

I left the mine and took up an offer of a job at Australian Defence Apparel, and that paved the way for me to attend a number of defence industry conferences around the world. Kathryn and I moved back to Brisbane, but I was away more and more, travelling around Australia and internationally.

At that time I said no to nothing, reasoning that the work might dry up one day and that I should make as much money as I could for us while it lasted. I would be on red-eye flights across the country and sometimes even though I would get to Brisbane, I would not even make it home, spending time in an airport lounge until my next connecting flight. I went to a speaking gig in Los Angeles and spent less time on the ground in the United States than I did travelling there and back.

Some people might have thought it a glamorous life and I suppose I did for a while, but it was taking a toll, on me and my home life.

Kathryn had been attending nearly all of my public speaking events after the investiture, but she had a job and it soon became impractical. Also, I have distinct memories, one in particular of me talking at a Remembrance Day event, where I think things started to change for her.

Every eye in the crowd was on me, the room silent, hanging on my every word. And there was Kathryn, anonymous, at the back of the hall, with everyone’s backs to her, forgotten.

Things were getting tense at home, between Kathryn and me. Lieutenant General Morrison was right, the Victoria Cross had changed my life, and it was changing hers. The whole dynamic of our relationship had changed, and I was away more than I was home. I was on a wild ride, but it was not one that Kathryn had anticipated or signed up for.

As for me, I had gone from the highs of surviving combat, the difficulties of finding work in a market that didn’t seem to care much for what I, and others, had gone through, to the mad glare of the spotlight after receiving the VC.

Now, three years after the investiture, exhausted, but catching another flight to be away from home once again, I was the unhappiest I had ever been in my life.

TWENTY-FOUR

The sheer volume of work, the number of speaking requests I was receiving, meant that I had to ask for help. I turned to one of my oldest friends from the army, Marcus.

As well as being a good mate, Marcus had been an exceptional NCO and had been recognised with a Conspicuous Service Medal for his leadership skills in the battalion.

‘Mate,’ I said to Rando, ‘I’m starting to get overwhelmed by all the work requests. I wouldn’t mind some assistance.’

‘Great idea,’ he said, not getting what I meant at first.

‘I want you to assist me, to be my manager.’

‘Oh shit,’ he said. ‘I’d be honoured, mate. Am I going to be up to this?’

‘You’ll be fine,’ I told him.

From then, all the requests I received, from members of the public writing to me, to people asking me to speak at events and requests for me to support various charities, went through Marcus. He was good at it, but it was hard for me to let go, having taken on this role. Mark Donaldson’s words kept echoing in my mind, that no matter how I felt, all of these requests were of prime importance to someone.

Marcus and I were having one of our meetings and he had a pile of requests that he had ordered and annotated for me to have a look at. I, however, was at my wits’ end.

‘I want to have a break,’ I said to him.

‘I’m only putting these under your nose, mate,’ he said. ‘You don’t have to say yes to everything.’

‘I know that, I know that.’ I ran a hand through my hair, then flicked through the pile of requests. ‘Maybe I’ll just do that one . . .’

I tried managing my time better, and Marcus was certainly able to filter out many requests that were simply impossible to meet, because of diary clashes. In the meantime, my marriage was continuing to suffer.

In November 2015, Marcus called a halt. ‘Right, that’s it,’ he said to me. The exhaustion must have shown on my face. ‘No more events for you for the rest of the year. You need leave, mate. It’s very easy for me to say no to stuff, you don’t have to.’

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With Marcus’s help, I was able to better manage my public commitments and coordinate them with my work life and what little personal life I had.

But I was unsettled. There didn’t seem to be an easy fix to my relationship problems and my work for Australian Defence Apparel was losing its appeal. I was more of a public face of ADA, a roving ambassador, rather than having any meaningful role in how the business was run. It took me to many interesting places, but, ultimately, I wanted more.

As always in my life, the words of my grandfather came back to me. He had told me I needed to find out who I was in life and what I stood for, and while the army had helped me find my way into adulthood and, for a time, work out what I wanted to represent as a soldier, that part of my life was over. Here I was again, in circumstances not too dissimilar from my childhood in Lowmead, where I was lacking guidance and direction. All I had left of Grandad were his words. I wished, once more, that I could talk to him, to ask him what he thought I should do with this new life that had been served up to me.

I could, theoretically, spend the rest of my life – or as long as people wanted to listen to me – talking about what I had done at Derapet. But surely, I thought, there was more I could do.

I had taken on some charity positions, as a supporter of the veterans’ organisation Mates4Mates, the Returned and Services League, and Legacy. These were great causes and I felt that my position, and the VC, had given me the platform to contribute, perhaps make a difference, in a way I could never have helped my fellow soldiers and the families of the fallen if I had still been down the mines. However, I still felt that there should be more to my life.

Things were still strained between Kathryn and me. But around May 2016, I returned from a trip to the US, jet lagged and exhausted to some incredible news.

‘I’m pregnant,’ Kathryn said.

Even with Kathryn’s news, the reality was that life continued to be a hectic balancing act, with me still taking on speaking gigs to bring in money – we had an extra incentive to save now – and Kathryn feeling increasingly sidelined from this other life I was leading.

I had sworn all along that I would be a better father to any child of mine than Cowboy had been to me, and part of that commitment I made to myself was to be there for the birth of my child.

A few months later, I was on a flight from Canberra to Brisbane, heading home from a speaking engagement, and on board was the by then former governor-general, now Dame Quentin Bryce.

‘Let’s catch up,’ Dame Quentin said. She told me she had a home in Brisbane and gave me her executive assistant’s number to phone to organise a meeting. I followed up and Kathryn, now very pregnant, and I went to her place for afternoon tea on a warm November day.

‘What are you doing with yourself, Daniel?’ she asked me.

I sighed. I wanted to say something polite, but instead I unloaded on her. ‘I’m sick of being on the road all the time, or doing jobs where I don’t get much fulfilment, or if I do, then it’s just for a short time. I want something to . . . to challenge me.’

She set down her cup of tea. ‘It’s funny you should say that. I’ve got an office at QUT.’ The Queensland University of Technology is one of the state’s premier universities.

‘Really?’ I said, not sure where she was going.

‘Yes. Have you thought about doing an MBA?’

A Master of Business Administration? She had to be kidding. ‘You do know I joined the army at seventeen and have no qualifications at all?’

Dame Quentin told me she was sure that I could get RPL, recognition of prior learning, credits for some of the training I had done in the army, and she told me that I should I apply. It was something for me to think about, but I still had a hectic schedule and we were expecting a baby very soon.

In January 2017, I had a work commitment in the US. Kathryn was getting close to her due date, but I could not cancel my gig. She was admitted to hospital nine days before the trip and had to undergo an emergency caesarean section.

I cut the umbilical cord and watched our son, Jack, open his eyes for the first time.

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Two and a half years later, Kathryn and I divorced.

We have joint custody of Jack and I am determined to be the best father I can be to him. I hope to be there for him throughout his life, for as long as I live.

Kathryn says the Victoria Cross changed the dynamic in our relationship and she is right.

I figure that it is better for Jack to have two separate parents who love him than to grow up in a house filled with arguments and a lack of love. My mother carried a torch for my father, but I did not grow up in a house filled with love. If it was not for my grandfather, I would not have grown up with a positive male role model in my life. I hope Jack’s life will be better.

Before the divorce came through I decided to do something new with my life and follow up on the suggestion Dame Quentin Bryce had made, back at the end of 2016. Dame Quentin had been right – it turned out I was able to get recognition of prior learning for some of the things I had learned during my time in uniform. The military courses I had done gave me the equivalent of an advanced diploma in leadership and management, and my service also equated to a qualification in project management. It was funny, I had always thought of being shot at as an exercise in problem solving – it turned out that such skills were worth something after all.

I contacted Associate Professor Glen Murphy MBA, Director of QUT's Business School, and after discussing my background and what I wanted to do I decided to apply to study for an Executive MBA. I enrolled in January 2018.

For me, it was a daunting prospect, taking on twenty-four units of study, part time, over two years, with a toddler to care for part time after Kathryn and I split. When I met my fellow students for the first time, I didn't come out and tell them I was the holder of a Victoria Cross, though I did get some curious looks and I suspected a few people recognised my name or my face from my many appearances in the media.

I didn't actually let on, openly, about my VC until my second year of study, when one of my fellow students, Rachel, saw me on Facebook and put two and two together and asked if I was the guy who had been awarded the Victoria Cross. I told her I was.

I was full of apprehension as I began, looking at the amount of study, the amount of writing I would have to do. I questioned myself: was I good enough, worthy enough to do this, and was it the right path for me to take?

For someone who had not excelled at English at school, writing essay after essay was never going to be easy, but I persevered.

I had marked time during my Senior Certificate, not caring about my studies because I was almost certain I had a job waiting in the army, but now I was taking on a burden of study because I wanted to, because I wanted to take charge of the direction my life was heading in – for a change.

But at times, I wished I hadn't enrolled in the course.

Although I was managing my time better and being more selective over my public commitments, with Marcus's help, I could not say no to everything just because I had decided to go to university. I kept up my speaking engagements and took on the added responsibility of accepting a new job with the defence firm, Thales.

It wasn't easy, but after more than two years of balancing study, work and parenting, I graduated in August 2020. Once more I find myself wondering what my grandad would make of this new turn in my life. He always told me I would not and should not stay in the army forever, so I think he might be pleased.

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The end of this book is not, hopefully, the end of my life, but it is a time for the inevitable ‘what-ifs’.

As for my father, there was no tearful reunion after he showed up to see me receive the VC. There was no reconciliation, no remorse, no change, no fairytale ending. He died in early 2020 of bowel cancer.

What would have happened to me, I wonder, if Cowboy had been the only male role model in my life, if I had not had the benefit of my grandfather’s wisdom and patience and the moral code he instilled in me, not, I think, by design, but because Alan lived a life that was worth emulating? I learned the difference between right and wrong from my grandfather.

He instilled old-school values in me, waking me at two in the morning to go fishing, teaching me the patience required, as a kid, to sit still in a little boat for eight hours at a time. He never lectured me, never espoused a firm point of view, but he challenged me to think for myself and come up with my own ideas, my own beliefs, to help me on my way in life.

He was a man who worked three jobs and was often away from his family, but it did not stop them feeling his love or benefiting from his example. My work will, inevitably, take me out of town, but I still want to be there for Jack in the same way Alan was for his children.

Many service marriages, where one partner is in the defence force, do not last. The pressures that a career in the army, navy or air force put on a couple – the long absences, the anxiety of overseas deployments – take their toll. As I have said, it is not a stretch to say that I knew more about the people I served with and they more about me than our partners knew at the time.

Kathryn and I met at the busiest time of my military career, at a time when I was hungry for more overseas deployments, more new experiences.

However, we also got together at a stage in our lives when there was more or less a clear projection of how they would play out. Our path was mapped out: I would go away to the war, I would (hopefully) survive, at some point I would get out and get a civilian job, and we would marry and have children. I was, at that time and that age, quite happy to follow a plan that in my mind represented what ‘normal’ people – people who were not like where and how I’d grown up – did, simply because it seemed like the right thing to do.

Kathryn was not naive. She had come from a service family and knew, to an extent, what she was getting herself into. When I left the army, however, I was once more taken away from her, searching for work in the deserts of Australia and then, like a service spouse sent to some far-flung posting, she had to uproot her comfortable life in Brisbane for a sweltering miner’s shack.

However, that life that we had probably both envisaged for ourselves, that ‘normal’ existence, was blown to smithereens the day that Lieutenant General Morrison flew to Kalgoorlie and handed me that piece of paper.

What if I had stayed in the army? If I hadn’t injured my leg the first time, doing PT in Iraq, I would not have needed my first round of surgery and would have applied for Special Forces selection straight after Iraq. If I had been accepted, I would not have gone on that first trip to Afghanistan, where I learned so much.

The odds were very high that I still would have seen combat in Afghanistan, but what would have happened to me then? Even in peacetime or between deployments, Special Forces requires intensive training, long periods away from home. Would Kathryn have stood for that? Would my marriage have survived? Would staying in the army, with its rigid structures and timetables and periods of leave and duty, have made it easier or harder to bear the responsibility of being a holder of the Victoria Cross? I don’t know.

What if, when I returned from my second tour of Afghanistan in 2010, after Derapet, in need of more surgery, the warrant officer who took it upon himself to tell me which way my career would go had been more sympathetic, more supportive? I think the commanding officer could have succeeded in talking me out of leaving, if I had been given time to recover, but would that have also ended my marriage? Kathryn had made it quite clear that she was happy for me to leave the army.

What if I had stayed on the mines? I don’t know. I had shown some ambition, working my way up from the itinerant, backbreaking work of being an assistant on a drilling rig to the ‘comfortable’ position of a blaster. The money was good, I was working underground and, for a natural introvert, it was possibly a return to my days as a boy on the property in Lowmead, escaping day-to-day life with my .22 rifle and one of the dogs as I set off by myself into the bush.

I showed no desire, in Kalgoorlie, to leap at opportunities for further education or advancement into management. I think I might have still been working underground today if I hadn’t received the VC.

I am not going to go over the Battle of Derapet in a detailed forensic analysis of what went right and what went wrong on that day, or reflect on our strategy in the valley or on the prosecution of the war as a whole. I will leave that to the historians.

But what if I had been shot on one of the runs I did up and down the hill? If I had been killed, there are plenty who would have said I deserved it. If I had been wounded and therefore created the need for a second casevac chopper to come in, along with the attendant high risk to the crew and the boys on the ground, would history have judged me to be an idiot?

There are many positives to being a holder of the Victoria Cross.

One of the best things that happened to me was being invited by the then-director of the Australian War Memorial, Dr Brendan Nelson, to serve on the board of the memorial. At the time of writing, this iconic Australian institution is set for a major upgrade and, begun under Dr Nelson’s leadership, the vision is for the memorial to become a place of relevance and significance for today’s generation of veterans, as well as a repository of the nation’s military history. There are some people who might think someone like me, an ordinary soldier, might not have been up to the job, but my aim is to prove them wrong because I completely support the former director’s vision.

I have met and spoken with people whom I would never have been in the same room with, and the networking opportunities my official duties and speaking engagements have afforded me have opened doors to advancement that I would not have even been able to even knock on without the medal.

As a speaker, I am given the opportunity to motivate others and I make sure I take every opportunity to remind people that receiving an award is not and should not be just about the self, but about the team and the importance of teamwork and leadership.

I am grateful to have a voice to champion the needs and struggles of military veterans, of their families and of the wider veteran community through my involvement with the charities I support. Again, as a mineworker in Kalgoorlie, I couldn’t really have done more than perhaps buy a few raffle tickets or help fundraise. The Victoria Cross has given me the power to help people – who knows, maybe even change a life.

Any politician, actor or person with a public profile would, I am sure, agree with me that despite the benefits, life in the public eye is not easy.

There’s an old army joke about soldiers coming home from an exercise or operation and sitting down at the family table and saying, ‘Pass the fucking salt.’ I can no longer talk like a soldier when I am in public. I have to watch my language and my manners, but I have learned how to engage with people and to empathise with them. I cannot speak my mind, in public or on social media, or take a stance on politics, without being aware that my words will probably be seized on by the media in an instant and beaten out of all proportion; I have to watch myself all the time. I have turned down very lucrative offers of work and endorsement because I believe they would not be judged by the public to be in line with what the Victoria Cross stands for.

My grandad told me, time and again, that I needed to work out what I stood for. At times in my life I knew, or thought I knew.

The biggest ‘what if’ in my life is one where I know, for sure, that a single decision of mine could have had an immense impact – if I had ticked ‘no’ on the form General Morrison gave me in the cafeteria at Kalgoorlie Airport, asking me if I would accept the Victoria Cross. I did feel pressured, but I could have said no. That, of course, begs the question: if I had my time over, would I have said no?

Honestly, as I write this, at this point in my life, with what I know now, I am leaning toward saying that I would have refused the Victoria Cross.

For all the good the award brings, it has also brought regret. Many people see the positives; few know the negatives. My marriage is over. My son’s parents are divorced.

The worst thing about receiving the VC, other than the impact on my marriage, is that Anzac Day is no longer ‘my’ day. When I was younger, it was a day when I could reflect on my grandfather’s service, and everyone else in my family who had served.

The meaning of Anzac Day changed for me over the years, but it was always special. After Crash died, after that tour of Afghanistan when we lost so many other Australians, including several others from 6 RAR, the day became a time to remember my mates. I would get together with the people I had served with and we would pay tribute to those we had lost, and we would remember our own experiences, good and bad. Anzac Day became personal for me, and not just about my grandfather and all Australians who had served. For me, it became a day of intensely personal reflection.

Once the VC came along, however, I became public property.

I could no longer simply go to the pub and chill with my mates. Now, on Anzac Day, I can’t walk two metres without someone wanting to have a chat and have their picture taken with me. On Anzac Day 2019, I had friends over who had flown from around the world to be with me, and people I had served with, but I couldn’t spend as much time as I wanted to with them, because the Victoria Cross means I have to share my experiences with strangers.

On 25 April 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic prevented marches and ceremonies from being held and gave me the welcome chance to stay at home with those close to me. Like other veterans across Australia, I marked this solemn day at the end of my driveway.

Anzac Day and Remembrance Day used to be days for me, as an introvert, to observe and pay respect, but now I am under pressure – self-imposed, mostly – to perform and to do well. I get into the mindset at these public occasions by reminding myself that what I do, what I say, how I deport myself is a reflection not so much of me, but of the team I was part of, about my mates, and about the unit I served with, the 6th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment.

I'm not a victim and I am not without choice. I will sometimes choose to speak at an Anzac Day service outside of the capital cities. I agreed to visit a service at a mine one year and was flown to the remote location by the mining company the day before to address the senior leadership on the importance of teamwork. There was a nice irony about this, considering the only job I could get after leaving the army was in mining and how I'd had to drive myself from one side of the country to the other to get it.

The following morning I spoke at the dawn service, for the miners, and it was great, but one of the reasons I had agreed to do that engagement was that it allowed me to avoid all the media interviews and other requests that swamp me at that time of every year.

The saving grace for me is that every 25 April and every other occasion where I get to speak about the Battle of Derapet and the significance of the Victoria Cross, I can remind people of the fact that ordinary Australians, men and women, have put their lives on the line for their country and, more importantly, each other, for well over a century, and continue to do so today.

I see my role as an important one. My job is to remind *other* people, the rest of the country, that we have men and women who have left their wives and husbands and children and parents and other family and friends to serve their country, and that those men and women face the prospect of losing their life or a limb or their mental health in order to protect the freedoms that we all enjoy.

I now have a relative serving in uniform. My sister, Susan, who I reconnected with after receiving the VC, has three children now and her second son, Lane, joined the army. Susan and I went to Singleton in 2019 to see Lane march out from the School of Infantry, just as Grandad had done for me. Lane was posted to my old battalion, 6 RAR.

Most Australians have, fortunately, grown up in a world that is so peaceful and protected and politically correct that they have never known, or have forgotten, what war is like and what 'bad' looks like. It's easy to forget, as we complain about day-to-day life and politics and the problems we perceive, that we are very privileged to live in Australia.

I can remind people that this award is not about me; it is about everyone who was there that day. If I stand for anything, it is for them, the rest of the wider team I am proud to have served with. I stood for them on the hill that day at Derapet, and I stand for them every time I take to a podium or stage today.

I was never a great soldier. I was a good soldier, and the Victoria Cross has made me an instant expert on telling people what it's like to serve in a war zone. What I do with the platform the award has given me is up to me, but I feel a duty to do justice to those I served with and to those who still serve.

I am no longer a spectator of public life – I am a participant. There is constant pressure on me and my time, and I probably still say yes too often. It is definitely a risk that if I said yes to every request, it would be too much; this medal would become my entire life, and I can't let that happen.

However, saying that I would not accept the Victoria Cross if I had my time over again is not the same as saying that I regret saying 'yes'. I do not.

I don't want to sound like a whinger because the VC is not all bad. The best thing about this medal, made from a melted down canon, awarded for valour, is that it has given me courage of a different type. Looking back, I see now that when I left the army my horizons were limited – I just wanted to get a job and earn some money. Never would I have thought that I would go on to do a university degree, or to do postgraduate study. The VC gave me the courage I needed to see that I could reach for different goals, that I could change my life.

The VC has taught me, in my post-army civilian life, that it is okay to make mistakes, and that the important thing is to get out there and learn as much as you can and to have a go. Many people never have the impetus or the circumstances to allow them to change their life, to take on further education or to have a new start at life. The medal gave me the set of conditions I needed to do so.

Now I could do another university degree if I wanted to – there are no more barriers to me at least attempting to do anything I want in life.

As for me, I am a bit lost. I am still the boy from the bush who grew up on a dirt floor in a dysfunctional family, but I am also still Alan’s grandson, still working out who I am, what else I stand for, even with an MBA on the wall of the new house where I live.

I did not deserve the Victoria Cross – I deserved to be killed. But I survived and I am getting on with life. It’s not always easy – whose life is? However, as my mum, Judy, would say, I’m making progress on it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It’s not possible to mention or thank everyone who has had an impact on my life, or on the memories that have contributed to this book. However, I’d like to mention a few and apologise to anyone I’ve left out.

My mother, Judith Pyburne, contributed to the book by sharing many stories of her life. I’d like to thank her for helping me turn out like I did, and for her honesty in recounting some of the incidents I’ve mentioned. Thanks also to my sister, Susan, for always being there for me when we were growing up. Susan has three great kids of her own, Bodhi, Lane and Kirrilly.

I’d like to acknowledge and thank all the members of Delta Company and the whole of 6 RAR and those who supported us in MTF-1. Much of this book is your story, as well as mine.

I’d like to thank Casey for reading the different versions of the manuscript and being there to bounce ideas off.

In Canberra, thanks go to Sharon Prendergast, from the Australian Honours and Awards Secretariat in the Office of the Governor-General, for her input into the book, and for taking me for a night out, with her husband, after I received the VC.

Thanks also to my good friends Marcus Randall and Matthew Hutton, for their support over the years and for their memories of our time together that appear in this book. Several people contributed to or checked the section on the Battle of Derapet and its aftermath and, accordingly, my sincere thanks go to James Fanning, Sean Lanigan, John Cantwell, Nathan Tolman and ‘Parks’.

The writing of this book would not have been possible without Tony Park, a talented author and thirty-four-year veteran of the Australian Army Reserve, including six months in Afghanistan.

My final thanks go to everyone at my publisher, Pan Macmillan, for bringing this story to you, including Managing Director Ross Gibb and Director of Non-fiction Publishing Ingrid Ohlsson. Particular thanks go to Senior Editor Alex Lloyd, who got me thinking about writing it and subsequently worked on it all the way through.

My grandfather, Alan Pyburne (left), on the gun line in New Guinea in World War II. He really only opened up to me about his military service – the highs and the lows – after I had decided to join up.

The happiest memories of my childhood are of being out on the water, fishing with my grandfather.

My sister, Susan, and me by the canal which ran behind my grandparents' house. The move to Lowmead was much harder on her than me.

Life before Cowboy's return was fun and normal. Here are Susan, my uncle Anthony, my mum and me at a party in Maroochydore.

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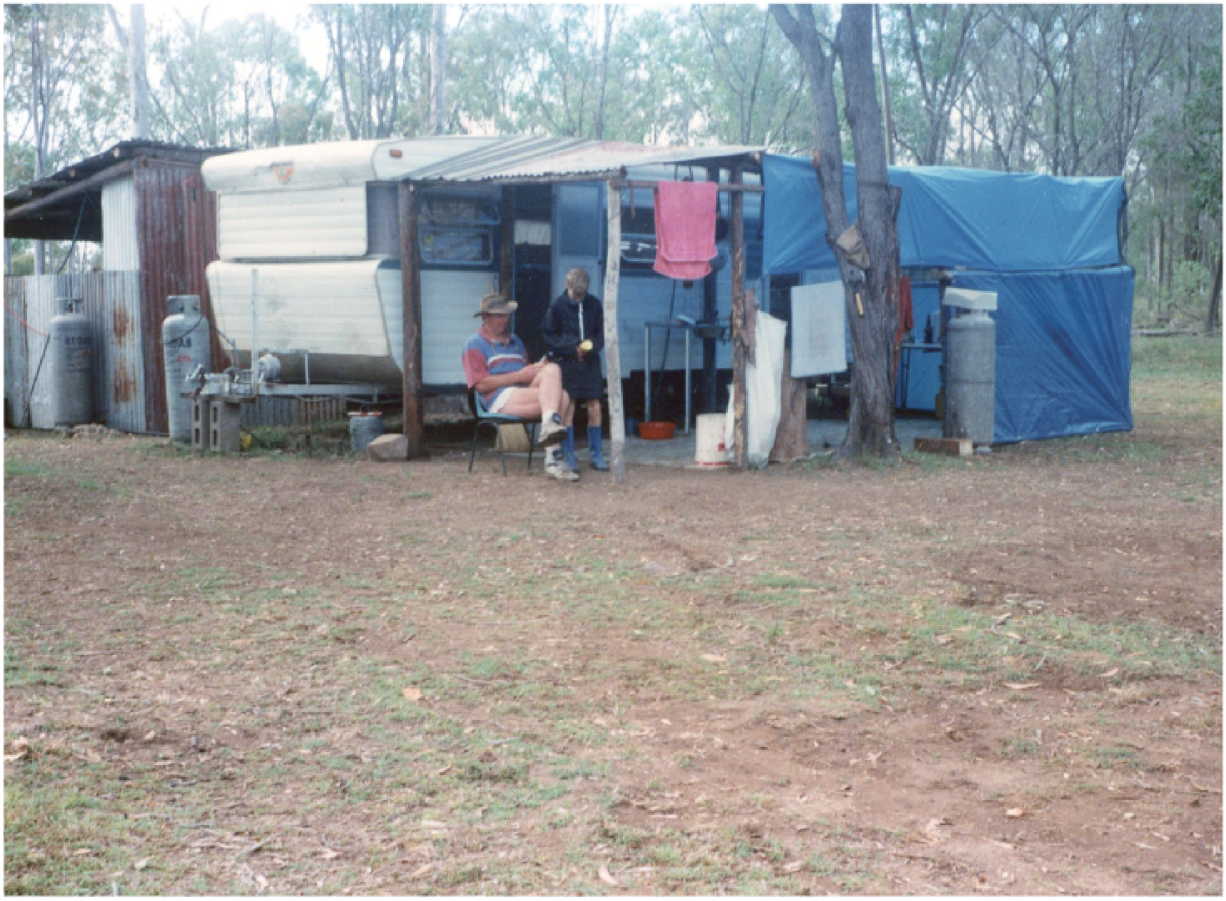
Cod Hole was one of our favourite places to fish and the local newspaper snapped a pic of Grandad’s record jewfish. Fishing taught me patience, and the value of listening. Alan Pyburne was my true father figure.



Cowboy and me at the rough and ready shack in Lowmead. Initially just corrugated iron, timber and tarp, it was later improved with an old caravan.

Mucking around at Lowmead with the .22 rifle Grandad bought me. He drew on his army training to teach me the correct way to shoot, and respect for firearms.

From an early age I was expected to pull my weight around the farm.

BEEF BOSS
WALK THROUGH
CATTLE CRUSH

I was given some calves of my own to raise (left and below), but Cowboy ended up taking them from me to pay a police fine.

Cowboy cleared the land at Lowmead to make room for our cattle

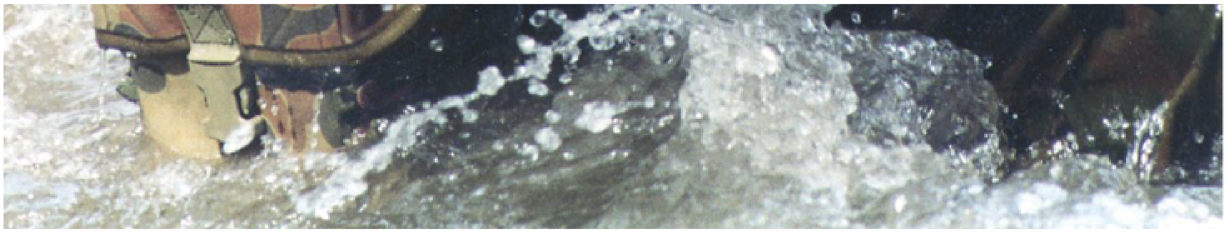
My mum’s precious horses

Cowboy and me at Lowmead, one unremarkable Christmas. Although my father drank to excess I didn’t really start drinking until after I joined the army.

I was never mollycoddled as a kid, but a spectacular fall off a steer at one of my first rodeos was enough for Mum to call a halt to that pursuit.

Both my parents were mad on horses and while I became a competent rider I didn’t have the same love that they did.

With fifty dollars in my pocket I was off to the army and a new life in 2000. I'd never even been on an escalator.



I was fit from running home from school, but my lack of upper body strength meant I sometimes ended up wading through water obstacles during training.

Tackling the obstacle course at Kapooka. I enjoyed the physical training and learning new skills.

Passing out photo at Kapooka (I’m fourth from the left, back row). Some recruits found it hard being away from home – I found it an improvement!

Jungle survival training in Malaysia where we learned to live off the land. I remembered Nev ‘Changi’ Anning saying how he’d had to eat bugs to stay alive as a prisoner of war. Marcus Randall is third from the left and Matt Hutton is third from the right at the back, next to me (far right).

Training on fighting on fortified objectives in Singapore, as part of our Malaysia deployment in 2001. It was in Malaysia where we heard the news that the World Trade Centre in New York had been destroyed by terrorists.

Drinks with the boys at Butterworth. The trip to Malaysia was my first outside of Australia, but far from my last.

NATIONS UNIES
WOUND DRESSING

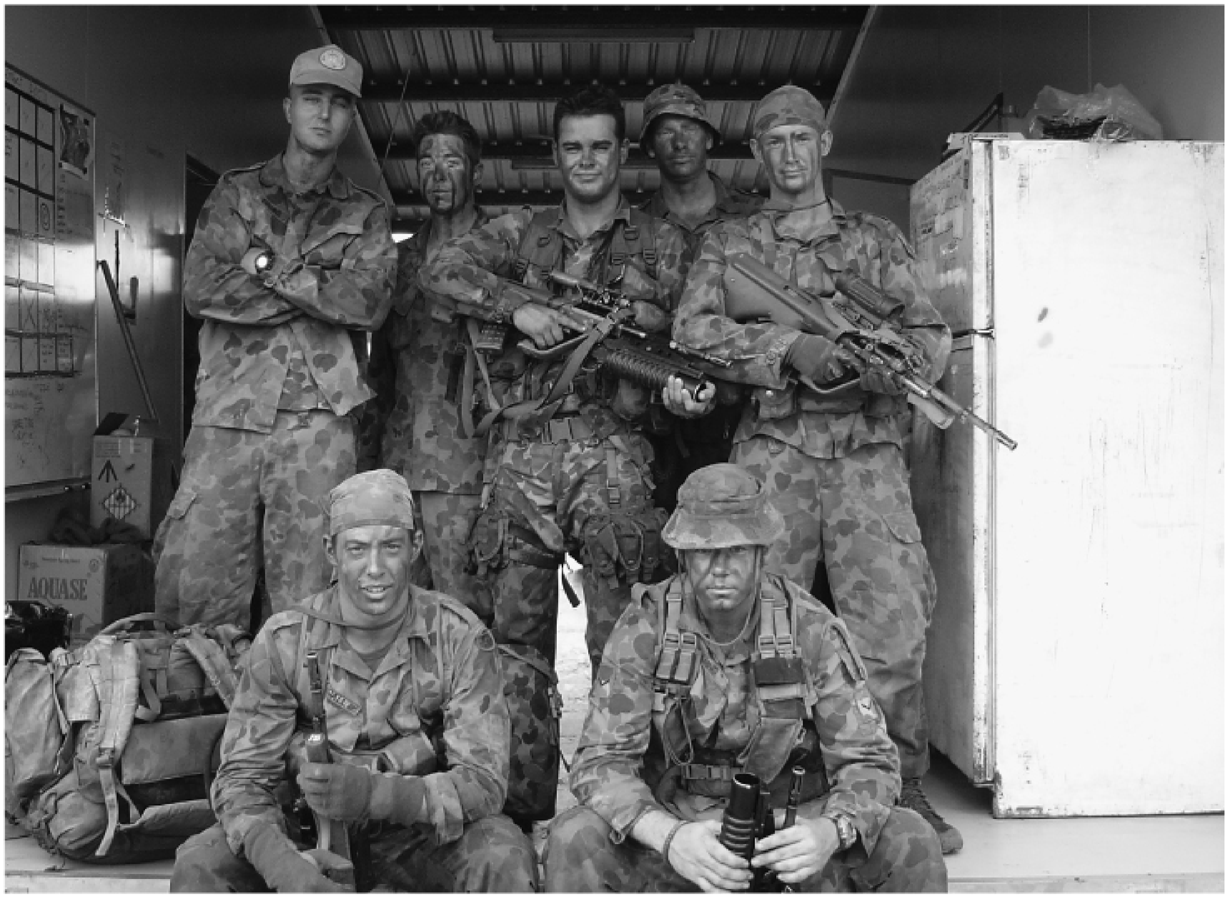
Grabbing a bite in East Timor, wearing the United Nations peacekeepers' blue hat, in our 2003 deployment.

UNMISET 8 6 4 4

Behind the gun on a six-wheel-drive Land Rover in Timor. I much preferred being in the vehicles than on foot, between the torrential rain and my pack weighing about as much as I did at the time.

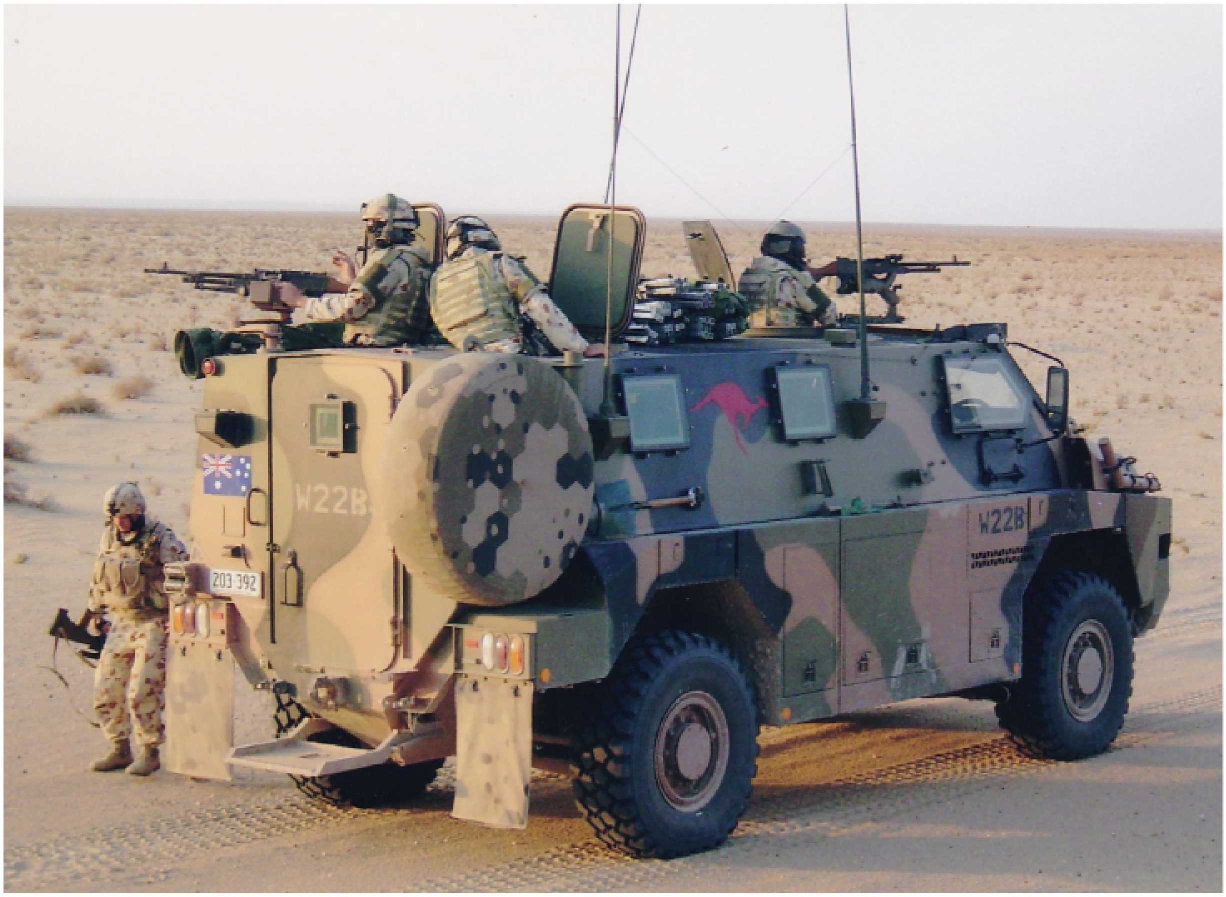
Waiting for a joy flight on a Russian helicopter. The pilot’s safety briefing was to the point: ‘If we crash, we die.’

As peacekeepers some of our patrols in Timor were high profile, a show of friendly force to reassure the locals.



Bombed up and cammed up for a jungle patrol on the border of East and West Timor. Our mission there, while valuable, was also a good dress rehearsal for the conflicts to come. Marcus is in the front on the left, Hutto is in the centre and I'm second from the right in the back.

Relics of the Iran–Iraq War. Some Iraqis I met in my 2006 deployment thought their country was better off under Saddam Hussein, others not so much.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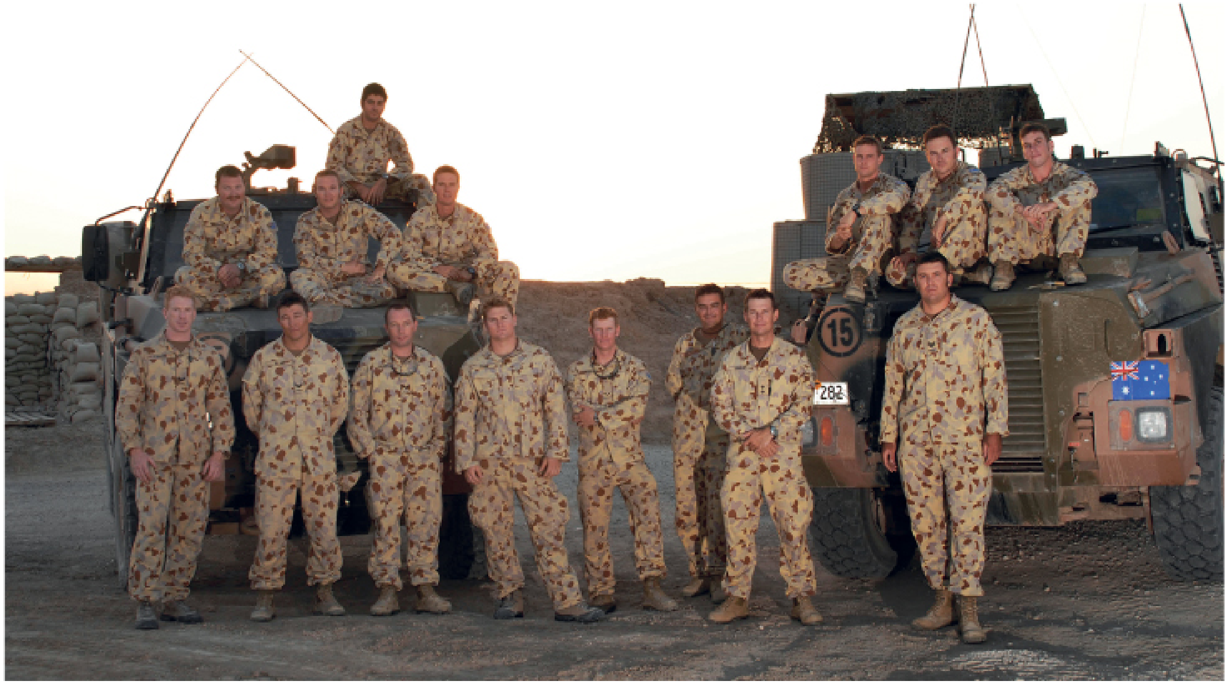
Qualifying as a driver on the Australian-designed Bushmaster protected mobility vehicle (PMV) earned me a ticket to Iraq, and later Afghanistan.



6 RAR PMV detachment in Iraq, me in the middle. Jared 'Crash' MacKinney is seated on the left-hand bushmaster, in the middle. To his right is Graham Blake. I lived with Blakey in a share house for a time and he got me my first job after leaving the army. Sergeant Adrian Ross is in the front, far right.

Department of Defence

The view from a Bushmaster cupola. Iraq was the first time I was shot at, and the first time I fired a weapon in anger.

With my mum, Judy, at Enoggera Barracks after a parade to farewell MTF-1 for our deployment to Afghanistan in 2010.

Finally, on my second tour of Afghanistan in 2010, I was able to patrol on foot in a traditional infantry role as a mentor.

Our group of Australian mentors posing with the French at Anar Juy before they left. A Frenchman warned me, ‘Do not go past the 42nd easting . . .’

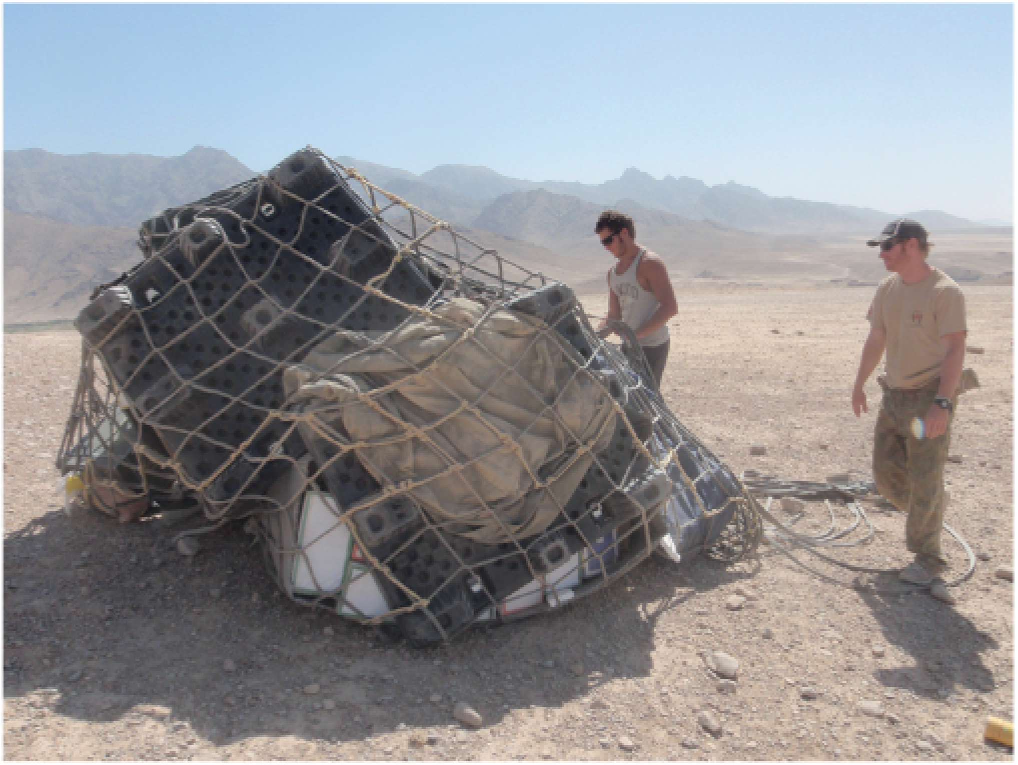
Returning from the patrol into Derapet on 22 August 2010. The enemy had fired on us as soon as we crossed the 42nd easting. Two days later, I’d be in the battle that forever changed my life.

Afghanistan – stark and desolate, yet somehow beautiful.

Me in front of the Afghan National Army patrol base at Anar Juy. The ANA lived about fifty metres from us.

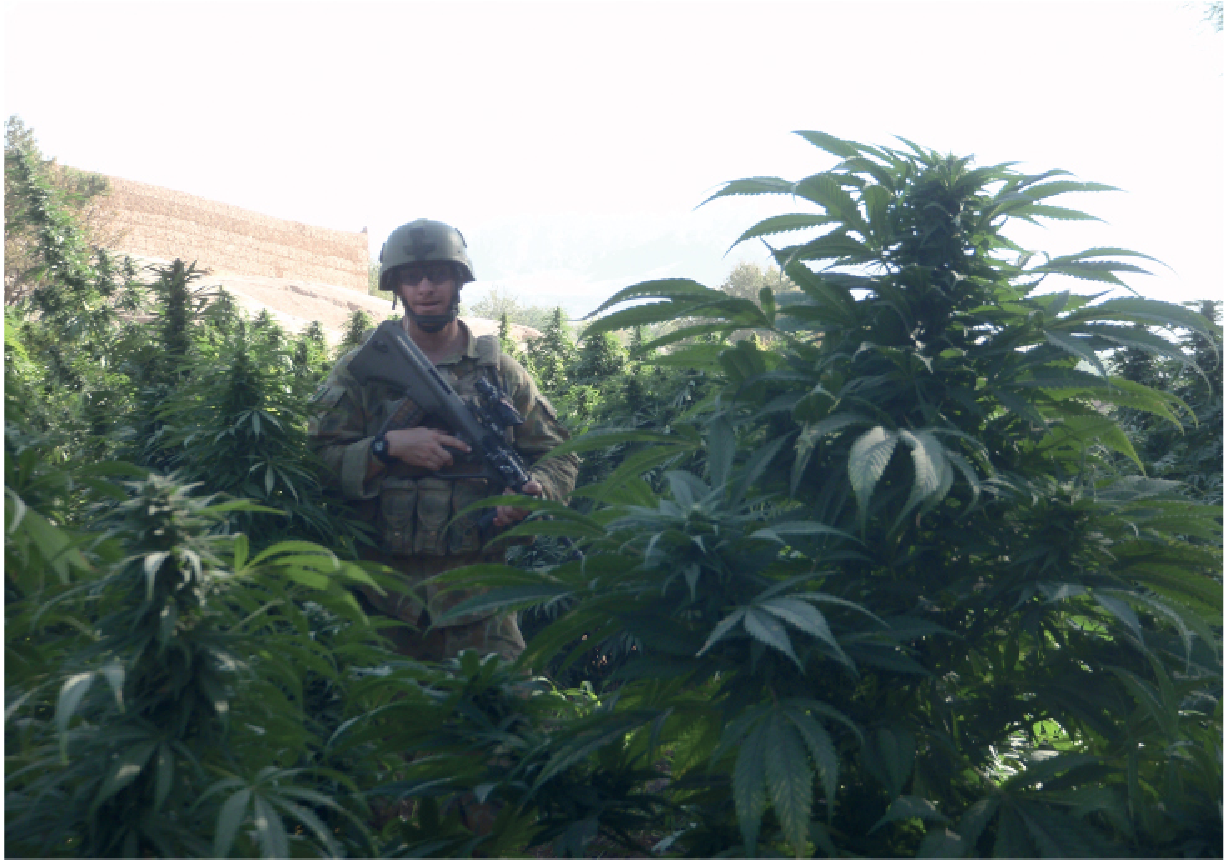
Securing a mud-walled compound, with a spectacular mountain backdrop.

On earlier deployments guys would relax with books and board games; by the time Afghanistan came along it was video games.



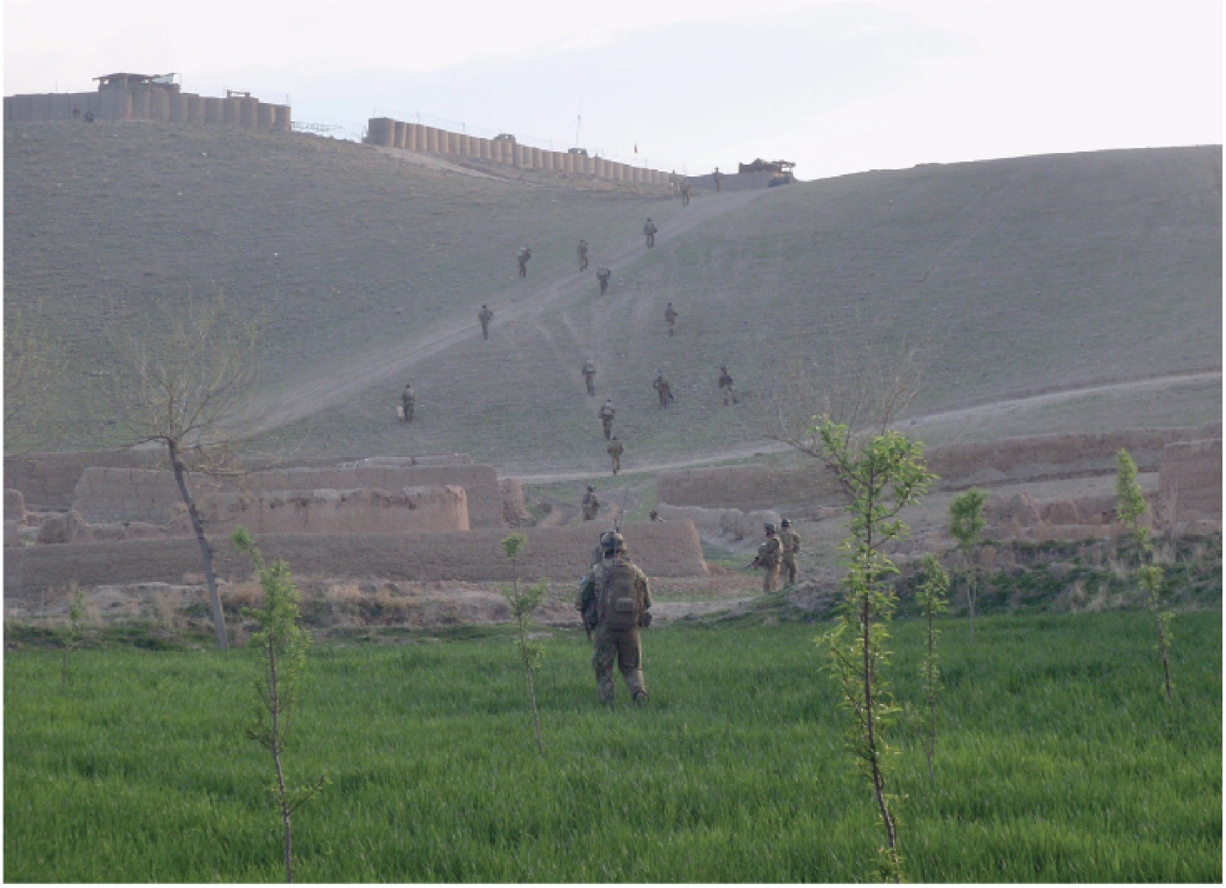
A net full of cargo dropped off by a helicopter – at Anar Juy we set about improving the living standards.

A convoy of Bushmasters (in the lead) and eight-wheel-drive light armoured vehicles. The LAVs provided our fire support.



A dope plantation to put my father’s paltry drug-growing efforts to shame! The Afghans were masters of irrigation.

Mentoring Afghan National Army soldiers training on the RPG-7 rocket-propelled grenade launcher. One guy's catchphrase was, 'RPG good!'



The contrasting terrain of Afghanistan, from the lush green zone along waterways to the dry deserts beyond.

Peak hour traffic, Afghan style.

Me setting up a Claymore anti-personnel mine at Anar Juy. The words on the mine read ‘Front Towards Enemy’, the way we liked it.

Firing a flare had become our way of marking the passing of one of our own. To pay tribute to Crash, killed in the Battle of Derapet on 24 August 2010, we wanted the biggest flare we had, an 84-millimetre.

I had to drive across the country, to the wilds of Western Australia, to find work. My first job after the army was as a bag snatcher on a drilling rig. Each of those white bags (previous image) weighed about fifty kilograms.

Governor-General Quentin Bryce presents me with the Victoria Cross for Australia on 1 November 2012, in Canberra. She would later play another pivotal role in my life. *Department of Defence*

Defence‘Don’t salute back,’ the Chief of the Defence Force, General David Hurley said to me, just before throwing me a salute. Lieutenant General David Morrison, Chief of Army, who broke the news to me, is watching on. *Department of Defence*

Susan, Cowboy, Judy and me on the day I received the medal. It was important that we all be seen as a family again, for one day at least.

Keith Payne VC, AM (left) and Mark Donaldson VC (right), two of Australia’s three other living VC recipients, were there to share the day with me. Both gave me sound advice. *Department of Defence*

I was just one of many people doing their job at Derapet. The day of the investiture was the first time since 2010 that I had been able to catch up with the rest of my team. Pictured are Tar Finnsson (far left); James Fanning (third from left); Joel Toms (fifth from left); me; and Sean Lanigan (seventh from left). On the far right is Matt Hutton, with Scott Magennis (second from right at the back); Tim Hurley (fifth from right); and Marcus Randall (sixth from right). Kneeling in front of me on the right is Lukas Woolley.

In front of the Roll of Honour at the Australian War Memorial in 2013. Later, in 2016, I would be honoured to be appointed to the memorial’s council.

Department of Defence

I loaned my original VC and other medals to the Australian War Memorial. I share former AWM director Brendan Nelson's (right) vision for the future of the memorial. *AAP Image/Alan Porritt*

From left: Mark Donaldon VC, Keith Payne VC, AM, me, Ben Roberts-Smith VC, MG, and then-director of the Australian War Memorial, Dr Brendan Nelson, at the launch of the new daily memorial service at the memorial in 2013. Ben Roberts-Smith was serving in Afghanistan when I received the VC, but he took the time to write me a letter. *Department of Defence*

Queen Elizabeth was as nice as any other great-grandmother. Kathryn, in the background, was up early in the morning checking YouTube for instructions on how to curtsy. *Sean Dempsey – PA Images/Getty Images*

At St James's Palace, 2014, after a reception with Prince Charles for Victoria Cross and George Cross recipients. The VC gave me the chance to meet people and do things I never would have dreamed of. *John Phillips/Getty Images*

Delivering the Anzac Day national address in Canberra, 2015. *Department of Defence*

At the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Lone Pine, fought at Gallipoli in 1915. With me (from right) are Mark Donaldson VC, Keith Payne VC, AM and Doug Baird. Doug’s son, Cameron, from the 2nd Commando Regiment, became the fourth person to receive the Victoria Cross for Australia. He was killed in action in Afghanistan in 2013 and awarded the medal posthumously. *Department of Defence*

At Lone Pine, Mark Donaldson and I read the citations of the eight Australians who were awarded the VC during the August offensive in 1915. *Department of Defence*

Life after the VC became a series of public speaking engagements. Here I am speaking to officer cadets at the Australian Defence Force Academy;

Soldiers at Lavarack Barracks, Townsville;

Training with and addressing athletes at the Invictus Games for military veterans. *Department of Defence*

I have become a participant in Anzac Day, rather than a spectator. In 2017 I travelled to Belgium to take part in services at Polygon Wood;

Menin Gate;

The Tyne Cot cemetery, where many Australians are buried. *Department of Defence*

2019
AUSTRALIA

Although I left the regular army after Afghanistan I stayed on in the Army Reserve. That gives me the opportunity to take part in significant events in uniform, such as the presentation of a new banner to the Australian Army in 2019. *Department of Defence*

My son Jack, not long after his birth, with my slouch hat and medals. I have promised him I will always be there for him.

VI
DUTY FIRST
ROYAL AUSTRALIAN REGIMENT

Anzac Day ceased to be a day of private introspection for me after the VC, but on 25 April 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic prevented marches and ceremonies from being held and gave me the welcome chance to stay at home with those closest to me. Like other veterans across Australia, I marked this solemn day at the end of my driveway.

About the author

DANIEL KEIGHRAN VC is an Australian Army veteran and the 99th Australian to ever receive the Victoria Cross. He was invested with the VC in 2012, the third Australian recipient this century. He lives in Brisbane.

Praise for *Courage Under Fire*

‘One of Australia’s most reluctant heroes. A raw, honest, humorous and inspirational story of a modern soldier and the burden of heroism.’

Mark Donaldson VC

‘The harshness of Daniel Keighran’s boyhood instilled in him mental and physical toughness, a fearlessness that carried him through unimaginable feats as a soldier. Courage in spades. He describes his daring risk-taking as an addiction to danger. His mates and his fellow Australians recognise it as bravery. He was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions during the Battle of Derapet in Afghanistan. Two simple words on the dark metal decoration with a purple ribbon say it all – “For Valour”.’

The Honourable Dame Quentin Bryce AD, CVO

‘Daniel Keighran would say that he was an ordinary man, just a soldier doing his job. From the occasional chaos and sometimes drama of his upbringing, in the army he became remarkable. His gallantry and willingness to put his life on the line is an inspiration to every other man and woman in uniform and to the wider Australian community. His humility and self-effacement since his award only adds to our admiration of this exceptional man.’

General the Honourable Sir Peter Cosgrove AK, CVO, MC (Ret’d)

‘From a tough upbringing in outback Queensland to selfless courage on the battlefield in Afghanistan to save his mates, this book tells the inspirational story of a soldier’s soldier.’

Air Chief Marshal Sir Angus Houston AK, AFC (Ret’d)

‘Daniel Keighran’s story, from humble beginnings to national celebrity, is one of personal character, extraordinary courage and deep compassion for his mates. His story will make all Australians proud.’

Major General John Cantwell AO, DSC (Ret’d)

‘Dan’s book explains the enormous ramifications of a moment in time – a moment that changed him from being one of many diggers working hard in a dangerous conflict zone to a nationally recognised figure, a hero in the word’s full meaning. Dan’s world changed and this book charts that change in Dan’s inimical style: down to earth, humorous, practical, observant. His highs and lows, the impact of the award on his family, and his story about being a soldier, are important additions to our understanding of our military history. A good book about a good man; well worth the read.’

His Excellency General the Honourable David Hurley AC, DSC (Ret’d)

‘He was the boy who lived in a caravan with carpet his father retrieved from the tip. He was the soldier who silently, resolutely guarded an observation post in East Timor as scorpions crawled over his body. At Derapet he was the man who said to himself, “Somebody has to do something.” And he did, breaking through fear to run and run again under intense enemy fire to protect his mates. *Courage Under Fire* reveals the character of a man who wears humility more comfortably than his medals. Leadership can’t be taught, but it can be learned. The power is in the story. To read this one is to be a better person and a better leader.’

The Honourable Dr Brendan Nelson AO

‘The Royal Australian Regiment, to which Dan belonged, has the motto “Duty First”. He is the epitome of what that requires of those who serve in its ranks. He is a great Australian with a great Australian story to tell.’

Lieutenant General David Morrison AO (Ret’d)

Some of the people in this book have had their names changed to protect their identities.

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